InkDrop 2026

Issue 1



Life

Foreword

If you ask Oxford Dictionary what life means, you'll learn that it is 'the condition that distinguishes animals and plants from inorganic matter'. However, if you asked someone, they're more likely to describe their own life, whether that be the moments that shape their past or their wishes for the future. It may even be a more intangible goal, like striving for betterment, overcoming trials, or seeking answers to the unanswerable.

As you can see, life is a very difficult thing to encompass in a few words. Thus, the goal of this issue is not to confine life to a singular, static meaning, but to express just how limitless and individualised this theme is.

Lastly, I'd like to say thank you to all the people who made this project possible: our MIC, Mr Mansfield, my fellow leaders (Ava Fyfe and Rosemerry Ali), Queenie Meng for drawing our stunning cover, and all our wonderful writers, artists, editors and graphic designers for their work. Most of all, thank *you*, the one taking time to read this work. It is your support that allows us to continue doing what we do. Please enjoy!

– Elaine Wang (2026 InkDrop Leader)



SECOND HAND LIFE

By Claire Cheng
Art by Sabine Briais



The markets always opened at dawn – whether it be rain, shine or snow.

Not because customers cared about the sunlight, or the fresh scent of morning air, but because the memories glowed best under the sunrise.

Rows of tables and slatwalls stretched down the bustling market lanes, each one crowded with stuffed toys and jewellery and other rustic mechanical gadgets of sorts. They caught the pale morning light, some fresh on the displays, some having dimmed over countless nights in the same place.

Each object held a small marble worth much more than its size. Each marble held a small memory, worth much more to a certain buyer than it may seem. And each memory held a certain experience, unique to all others. One might be the scent of rain trapped in a silvery haze, or the feeling of a warm fireplace in an amber glow, or a bright light reflecting a crowd of people laughing at your jokes.

People wandered through the markets either with aim, or aimlessly. They walked slowly, with intent and intrigue. Much like those fanatics who walk through museums without understanding what the pieces truly mean, these fanatics walk through the aisles and tables of memories as visitors of lives they had never lived.

I had worked the markets for six years, on the edge of my seventh. It was long enough to know all the names of the regulars, and those who were looking for a new experience, and those who were looking to replace a loss.

A man approached my stall, my second customer of the day.

“Looking for anything in particular?” I asked.

“First snow,” he replied, shifting on his feet. “Um, I got rid of mine too early.”

I nodded and produced a glittering snowman pendant with a glowing memory orb attached. Inside, tiny snowflakes drifted endlessly through a frosted backdrop. The man paid, pressed the pendant against his chest, then walked away smiling discreetly. Simple transaction. Another life patched. A smile brought to someone’s face. That’s all we memory brokers do, honestly. Fill the cracks, glue everything back together, mend some stuff. These were just transactions. They aren’t really anything too precious to me.

By midday, the markets were bustling with energy. I could practically feel the buzz of voices and laughter. I caught a glimpse of someone down the aisle checking out an oyster with a sapphire blue memory orb instead of a pearl inside – the scent of salty waves and toasted sand wafted down to my block.



I was reorganising the grid wall behind me when my eye caught something peculiar.

A music box.

It hung by a frayed string, near the corner where the old stock is forgotten until someone needs it. It wasn't the faint glow, peaking out of the lid of the box, that attracted my gaze, though. It was the lack of activity around it, like some sort of aura of silence. But the strangest part was that it was unlabelled.



By law, every memory has to be labelled. A tag, a date, a source of origin. This object had nothing. But this object, perplexingly, also compelled me. I took a slow step towards it, while everything around me seemed to go still and quiet. The buzz of people softened into background noise as I reached out tentatively.

I lifted the music box.

It seemed so light in my hands, but I felt like it contained another world.

Inside, was a letter, I found. My eyes cracked at the faded words and the name it was signed by.

"Mum?"

Without hesitation, I snatched up the pulsing orb in the music box, crushing it against my chest like it was my lifeline. The seal breaks.

At first, I felt nothing. I glared down at the stupid old music box, tossing it aside on that stupid old floor.

And then everything around me changed.

Like, it all disappeared.

And I looked down at a pair of small feet, toes wiggling in soft, fresh grass. Sunlight filtered through the leaves of a large oak above me, light dappling onto my little figure. Somewhere nearby – no, right next to me – I could hear my mother's voice.

"Come closer!" She said, kneeling down in the grass to meet my eyes. I turned and waddled a little towards her. This world felt too bright, too big, and impossibly alive. I knew this moment. No, I had known this moment.

I think... I think this is the first memory I ever lost.



“Hey. You alright? I have a surprise for you...” My mother’s voice faded just as I started to see reality melt back into my vision. The last thing I grasped before the markets came crashing into my head was her sweet smile as she offered that little music box to me, a familiar but now lonely melody playing from it.

The world snapped back to me. I was no longer little, in the grass, or in that big, vivid place. Objects clinked softly on their hooks, and customers murmuring to each other wandered past my stall, blatantly unaware that my chest just cracked completely.



My hands trembled uncertainly. So this is what it feels like to get a memory back?

Then I paused, glaring down at the floor once more.

By law, every memory has to be labelled. But by law, there can also be no retail of first memories. Yet here it was, hung by that tattered string on that rusted hook, somehow. I stared into the fragments of the memory orb, and I thought I could almost see the dappled earth and the rustle of the leaves as the melody faintly played in my ears.

Which meant that someone had taken it.

Or worse, sold it.

A strange realisation settled into my heart.

Maybe these memories were more precious than I realised. They weren’t just products, or petty commerce, or something to be advertised. Maybe these memories are what make everything around us so unique, because the memories of us are what build our lives in the first place.

I mumbled to myself, tapping my fingers on the counter of my stall. I glanced back at the music box, looking so innocently still on the floor.

I think some memories aren’t meant to be traded.

They should be kept and protected, because life isn’t something you can buy back when it’s gone.

Nonetheless, this one managed to find its way out of my hands and into someone else’s.

So I scooped it up, carefully dusted the memory orb fragments into the music box, and slid it into my bag. And when I get home, I will hunt down whoever stole my first memory and kept it where it didn’t belong.

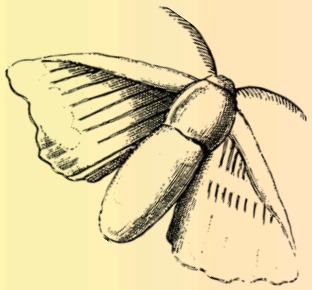
There was still one more mystery to solve.

ARTIST: HARMEHAR HEER

-LIFE IS LIKE A BATHTUB FULL OF WATER-

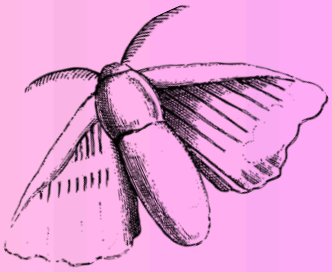


This artwork is called “Life is Like a Bath Tub” and it uses the bath tub as a metaphor for life. It shows how people try to hold onto the good things and keep them plugged, while draining the negative experiences that can weigh them down.



The Echoes of Summer

Written by Elisabeth Brown
Art by Lolade Ojo



The dull streetlamps blink on overhead,
bathing the pavement
in yellowish light.

An army of moths are instantly drawn to them,
fluttering around each bulb,
dancing delicately
like tiny winged
ballerinas.

I promised I'd be home from training
by the time they came on,
but I guess
I lost track of time.

My hair,
cut into a short brown bob,
is almost dry now
but my faded T-shirt is damp,
clinging to the shape of my wet one-piece underneath.

My worn thongs,
three summers old now,
slap the concrete beneath my feet,
breaking the silence of the evening
and creating
a strange sort of repetitive drumbeat.
SLAP, WHAP, SLAP, WHAP.

The deep, earthy smell of rain
hangs low in the air,
like fog
over the ocean.
It's heavy,
and fills my lungs
with every breath.

I turn down a side street
which opens into a cul-de-sac
with only one
working streetlight,
meaning all the other kids
have already gone inside for the night.

I walk up the pathway
to the third house
on the left
and turn into its driveway,
past the white letterbox with its street number
hand painted on the front.

The concrete of the driveway
is rocky,
worn down from
years of use,
with stubborn tufts of grass
poking through
the cracks.





I walk around to the backyard,
a decent sized patch of grass with a trampoline,
to the patio,
navigating my way around
deck chairs,
a table,
and the occasional scooter
until
I reach
the back door.

I kick my thongs
into the shoe rack,
turn the lock,
and throw open
the screen door,
the distinct, metallic crash
echoing out into the darkness,
as I slam it closed again.

The faint sound of the TV
escapes from the lounge-room
but I turn to the right
and walk down the hallway,
past my brother's room,
until I reach my bedroom door.

I turn the copper-coloured handle
and

CREAK

open the door,
grappling through the darkness
for the towel
hanging on a hook behind it.

Leaving the door
slightly ajar,
I continue down the hallway,
my feet pitter-pattering
along the cool tiles,until I reach the bathroom,
where I close the door
and feel for the light switch.

I peel my navy togs
off my body.
They're still wet and stink of chlorine
so I
chuck them in the bath
and slip into the shower.

Warm water
runs down my body
as I tilt my head up
towards the showerhead,
breathing in the steam.

I have this thing where,
even on a hot night,
I still take
a warm shower
because then everything
feels cooler
afterwards.

Wrapping the old towel around me,
I tiptoe back down the hallway,
careful not to wet the tiles.

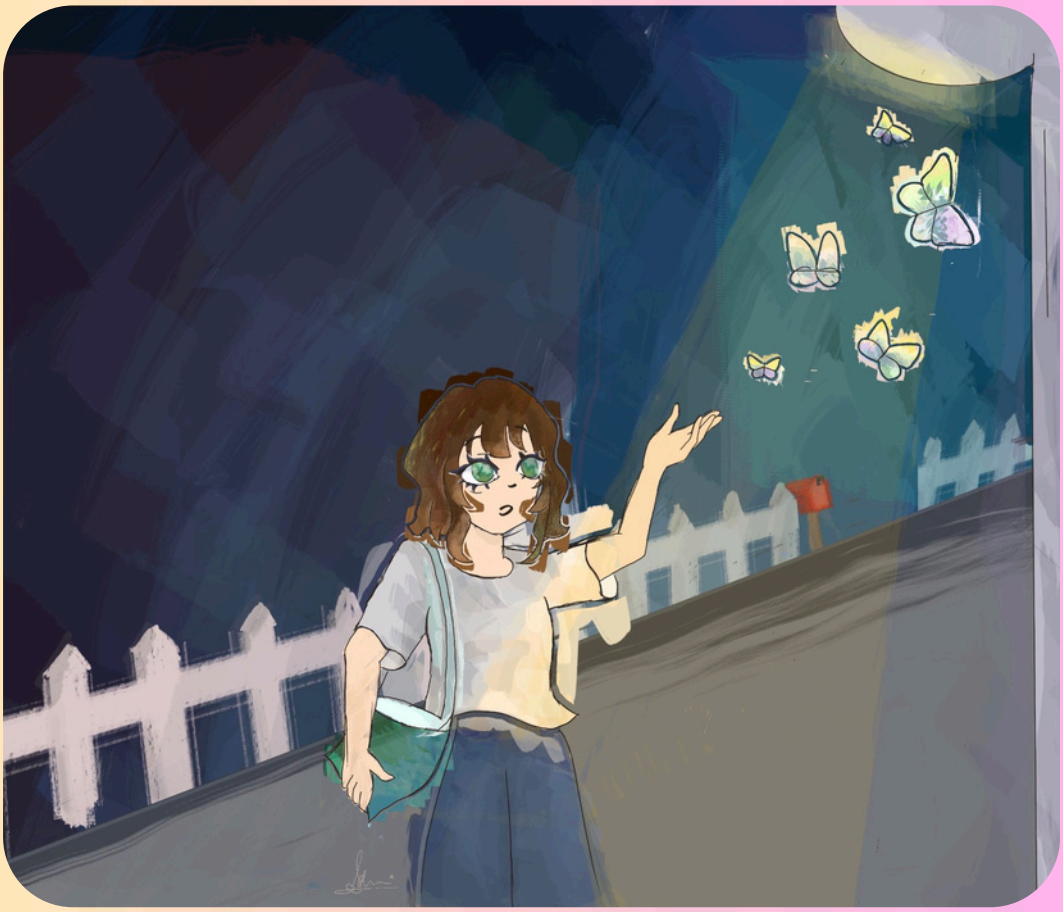
I yank open my top dresser drawer
and grab
a very old,
over-sized shirt,
pulling it over my head.

It's so big it
hangs past my knees like a dress,
just the way
I like it.

Exhausted,
I flop down onto my bed,
the fresh sheets cool
beneath me.

The smell of sausages makes me hungry
as it mingles with
the faint smell of chlorine
clinging to my body.

I stare up at the ceiling,
at the glow-in-the-dark stars
I stuck up there
back when I was six, and
close my eyes,
breathing in deeply
the familiar scent
of home.



Art by Jennifer Sun



BENEATH THE STARS

By Micole Devinuwara
Art by Mio Wolley

Any astronaut worth his spacesuit understands that when the going gets tough, only the tough get going.

But Ekito wasn't an astronaut yet, and he certainly wasn't tough. Not if all he wanted to do was collapse into his warm bed instead of facing finals week head on like the clever confident pilot he was supposed to be.

A clever confident pilot would never score in the single digits on the Aurelian simulator either...

Ekito screwed his eyes shut, slumping back into his armchair, cheek pressed into the padded side wings. His notebook lay limp in his lap, as his pen slid to the floor, littered with palm cards and thick reference books. He gritted his teeth as he buried his face in the leather, relishing the chill against his flushed skin while ignoring the ache deep within his chest.

'WAIT! Don't deploy drop-off controls now, we're not close enough to deliver the relief kits!'
'WATCH OUT, there's an asteroid right there-'
'Engage defences now Ekito, there's not enough time!'
'Did you even practice this run!'
'SWERVE IDIOT! WE'RE HEADING STRAIGHT FOR-'



I'm an idiot...

'Mars to Ekito? Are you still there buddy? Don't go lights out on me now, it's not even dinner time yet.'

The perky voice, coloured with the faint traces of exhaustion, filled his ears. Ekito inhaled deeply before sitting up straight, shifting to face his best friend and fellow pilot Micah, who was currently sprawled on his back amongst a sea of binders.

Micah returned his gaze with an unimpressed stare, before sighing.

'Are you still hung up on that sim? It was hard, and it was only a practice run. You'll improve, I know it.'
'Easy for you to say Mr Perfect-Score-First-Try'
'Don't be like that man. If Commander Walters would just put us on the same team for once, instead of pairing you off with that uptight Asada, we could have broken records by now!'

At the mention of his closed-off co-pilot, whose favourite pastime seemed to be critiquing his every move and outperforming him with every report card, Ekito sunk back into the cushions.

Uptight Asada and Idiot Ekito, a team fit to protect the universe for sure...

Micah's eyebrows furrowed slightly at Ekito's lack of responsiveness, before he shimmed around to face the window. Streaks of orange and pink dyed the skies, blanketing Marsden Academy in a hazy glow. Rockets framed the horizon, as the first evening stars glistened in the distance. Abruptly, Micah stood up before yanking Ekito out of his armchair and towards the door.

'Hey, you up for a little race?'

Ekito did a double take, taking in Micah's starry eyed expression and his suggestive eyebrow wiggling. He opened his mouth to protest, despite the excitement prickling in his chest.

'But the test...and how would we get into the hover-storage...'

Micah wordlessly dangled a set of keys in front of him in response, with a smug smirk.

'Nicked it off big brother when he came to give the demo. It's the old-fashioned backup Headmaster came up with in case of blackouts, so he probably doesn't even know it's missing. Besides, you look like a raccoon in need of an urgent break'

His admission pierced Ekito's chest, squashing down his any thoughts of the simulator or being caught after curfew or the essay he still had to write. Before he could come up with any reason to stay, he grabbed Micah's hand and rushed towards hover-storage, registering Micah's cry of victory behind him.

The clinking of their boots echoed through the empty hallways, with every cadet holed up studying and all commanders enjoying the calm student-free atmosphere in their offices. It seemed they wouldn't have to worry about being questioned by nagging officers, with no one around to even notice them leave the facility. As they approached storage, their steps quietened. Micah slid the key into the lock before they slipped through, as the door shut behind them with a soft snick.

There, hiding beneath their dust covers, sat two shiny hover bikes. Micah tossed the ring of keys to Ekito, who thumbed through them until he found the right one. He inserted it into the guard-lock, letting the chains drop as he unveiled his bike. It was smooth and sleek, with white and red detailing that wound around its jet black body. Freshly-painted decals shone even as the bike was shrouded in the shadows of the garage. Piping, well-worn with gravel and dust, snaked across the underbelly, mingling amongst the lighting strips that lined the base of the craft.

The corners of his mouth turned upwards in a soft smile, before he mounted instantly, sinking into the plush seat as he pulled his visor down. Grinning at Micah, who was perched atop his bike now, he kick-started the engine. Deep sputtering rang out through the room as the garage doors folded back. Micah held up five gloved fingers, before beginning the count down.

'Last one to pass Port Akers loses, got it? May the best cadet win!'

Ekito gripped the handlebars in response, facing the doors in anticipation.

You can do this. You're good at hover-biking. You love it.

The countdown reached zero and Ekito shot off.

The first thing he registered was the wind whipping through his hair and beating down on his face. Puffs of hot sand lashed against his legs, grains leaping up from the vast red dessert that stretched beneath his feet. The thrum of the bike against his boots sent shivers up his spine as the engine snarled, desperate to win the race. He barely registered the twin growl of Micah's bike beside him, as he hollered into the distance, the yell tinged with adrenaline and excitement. His heart thumped in his chest as blood rushed to his ears, grinning back at Micah he hollered too. He raised his fist, baiting Micah into the challenge, receiving a smirk in return.

It was loud. Deafeningly loud. The fear of not giving it his all drowned in the rev of the engine. The worry of not doing everything humanely possible was shook off like the gravel he brushed from his pants. His eyes widened with relief behind his visor as sweat dripped down his brow. He charged forward, foot pressed on the accelerator, whizzing past rocks and pebbles and all his troubles simultaneously.

On and on. Longer. Faster. More and more.

This is a pilot's dream. An astronaut's life. This is all I want. The chance to explore the universe. To protect it, the thrill of space pulsing through my veins with my best friend by my side.

As the silhouette of Port Akers greeted him, just a couple kilometres away, Ekito's focus snapped back. He gazed over his shoulder, Micah's headlights taunting him as he drew closer and closer.

You can do it. You can win.

Ekito hunched over and gunned the last stretch. He could feel the warmth of Micah's headlights trained on his back. The roar of his engine grew louder and louder. Just as he reached the last kilometre, a large rock jutting out the sand caught his eye.

Too late.

Cursing, he swerved to the side, just in time to watch Micah glide over the rock with ease and cross Port Akers first.

His lips parted in shock, before his shoulders slumped with bitter acceptance. He hung his head, ignoring the trembling of is fingers against the handlebar, as the exhilaration seeped out of him with every shaky breath.

It was just a friendly race! It's not Micah's fault he's incredible at flying, he doesn't deserve a reaction like this when he just tried to cheer me up...and I had fun too.

He schooled his expression, before riding over. Micah had disembarked, raising his fist in victory, beaming up at Ekito as he dismounted himself.

‘Let’s go! 1-0 to me! You almost had me, but you’d better go twice as fast on the rematch or else I’ll win aga-’

‘What’s the point? You’re clearly the better pilot aren’t you!’

Micah flinched, taken aback by Ekito’s scathing remark, dripping with envy, as he lowered his fist gently. Ekito stepped back, staring at the ground as shame pooled in his stomach. He clenched his fist as he blinked back his tears, before forcing himself to face Micah. Just as he was about to voice his apology and congratulate his friend properly for his win, Micah interrupted him with a soft smile.

‘Tonight’s perfect for stargazing’

Ekito blinked in disbelief as Micah grasped his arm and pulled him towards to the ground, before splaying on the sand himself with his arms cushioning his head. Ekito followed suit, gravel scratching his back as the warm sand coated his hair. He gazed up, breath hitching as he took in his surroundings. The remnants of dusk had faded into a deep blue that stained the skies amongst tendrils of purple and white. Stars splattered across the inky black expanse, shimmering and glistening like sequins on a strip of dark velvet.

It is perfect…

Silence seemed to drape over the planet as Ekito’s heartbeat slowed to a steady pulse. A bone-tired ache settled within him, as the remnants of his earlier outburst faded from his chest. He shut his eyes gently, only to open them once more as he felt Micah finger’s interlock with his own in a firm reassuring grip. As Micah’s rough callouses brushed against his own, born from countless hours of clutching aircraft controls and endurance training, an indescribable feeling curled in his chest.

‘Do you think I’m good enough to be an astronaut Micah?’

‘What makes you think you’re not?’

Ekito shifted onto his side to face his friend, whose eyes were hidden underneath his bangs as he continued.

‘You’re the hardest worker I know. I don’t care what Asada thinks or what Commander Walters says, I’ve seen it with my own eyes. Sure you make mistakes. Some of those mistakes could have easily been avoided. But making mistakes won’t prevent you from becoming a pilot. Self-doubt will’

Ekito drew in a sharp breath.

‘You didn’t score low in the simulator because you didn’t practice. You scored low because you were too worried about what ifs. What if Asada manages to pilot better than me? What if I haven’t trained enough? What if I flunk the test and never become an astronaut? Not even Neil Armstrong could pilot a rocket if he believed he would crash it, how could you Ekito?’

‘But…I’m not tough enough.’

At this, Micah sat up abruptly, eyes blazing.

‘Do you want to be an astronaut?’

Ekito shot up too, fists clenched in his lap.

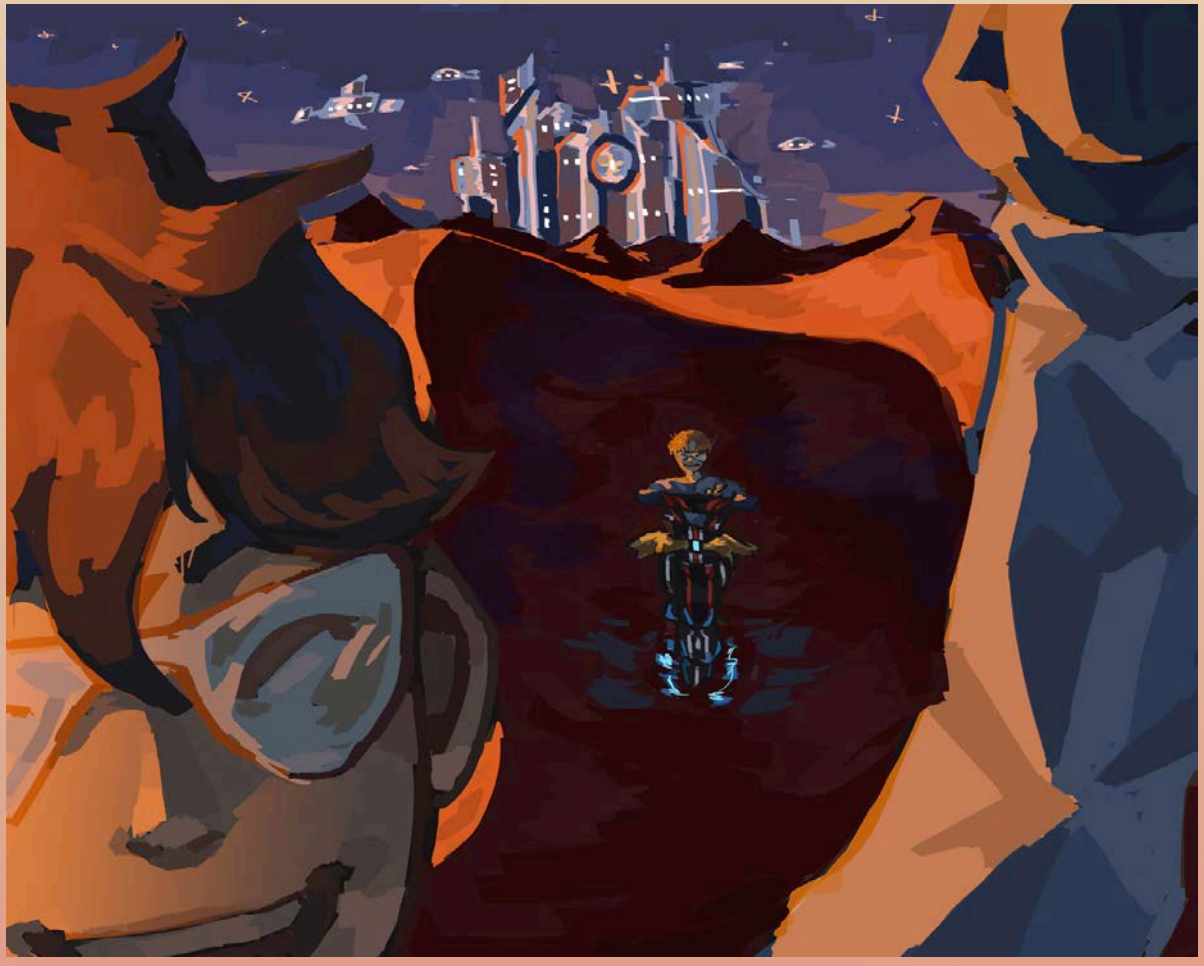
‘Of course I do! It’s all I want, it’s all I’ve ever wanted for my whole life!’

Micah chuckled, with a relaxed expression on his face, and slowly held his fist out towards Ekito.

‘Then that’s that. You don’t have to be the toughest, or the cleverest or the quickest. You just have to want it so much, that you’re willing to do anything to get there, regardless of how grating it feels to painstakingly drag yourself to the top, because you know it’ll be worth it when you get there.’

Ekito smiled softly, warmth and gratitude radiating in his chest as he fist-bumped Micah

‘I promise we’ll both become astronauts. Just you wait.’



ARTIST: ALEEZA KHAN

-WALKING ON THIN CHANCES-



This Artwork called ‘Walking on thin chances’ expresses this young boy’s resilience for survival as he suffers from a terminal illness ‘Brain cancer. In this ✨ masterpiece ✨, it shows above his head a health bar, however it is not on 100 %, this symbolises his terminal illness, the symbolic wings right besides him symbolises his strength to keep pursuing and hoping to live. This artwork took more than a week because I transferred it from paper to digital 😌 ✌️

The Sun and the Moon

By Seyara Vaz Goonawardhane

Some people are drawn to the sun, why wouldn't they be? He radiates a glow that overwhelms the sky, captivating the attention of every earthling that wanders the surface.

Fewer are drawn to me, the moon. I'm not noticed that much...actually rarely noticed. But there are some days where I glimmer, silvery and full, offering a luminous path to those like me: the lonely voyagers of the night.

Beneath my gaze, the travellers look up as if I were the only thing in the world, their calm pulses of energy slowly ebbing through the atmosphere like a rising tide reaching for me. Earthlings are curious creatures. They're all too wrapped up in their own lives to realise how short their span truly is. But in the rare moments of clarity, they look up to us to guide them, some to the stars, some to the planets and even some to me.

The hum of their wishes pulse through our minds. If it were up to me, I would grant every hope and dream, but alas there is only one with that overwhelming gift of power, the sun. Sometimes I wonder if the sun is too blinded by his own light that he fails to notice the mortals we are destined to watch over, day after day and night after night. I don't see the sun much anymore, not since we were little orbs brimming with excitement to learn what the future held for us.

The sun is the centre of our universe I know that of course. All us planets and their moons constantly revolving around him. But sometimes, just sometimes, we align to see how far we've come.

I keep my gaze fixed on the swirls of blue and green where the earthlings reside, but I feel a prickle as if I too were being observed. The stars are always there silently watching over us all. I'm not sure if that's where we come from or even if they are sentient beings, but I like to think so. Maybe one day, whether it be tomorrow or in a millennium, I too would be replaced and fade into one of those distant, twinkling lights.

I watched the stars, finally content in this solitude I had built until the sky began to tremble. The horizon ignited with a colour I hadn't seen in an age. It didn't just brighten it swelled with a bloom of warmth I could barely remember. Then, for a heartbeat that felt like eternity the shadows parted as he moved towards me.

We aligned.

There wasn't an overwhelming heat or blinding glare, just a silent recognition. In that bridge of shadows, the Sun didn't just glance past, he looked. He looked at me. For a breathtaking moment, the universe was completely still, and I realised he wasn't blinded by his own light, only waiting for the world to go dark enough to finally see me here, right where I am, just me as I've always been.



Seven Minutes

By Grace Xiang

She steps out of her final moment without fight. One last breath, and instead of nothingness like she expects, there is the hush of a shoreline at dusk. Each wave rises, curls, and breaks, and in the place of a crest, a memory flickers like a scene projected on glass. The air feels thinner, but not cold. Her body feels present, but not heavy. Thoughts feel clearer, but less urgent. Her seven minutes have begun.

The first image to appear is her first picnic. A checkered blanket set out on the overgrown grass. Sunlight filters through the treetops, kissing her sweet cheeks. She is only four. They feed her and she decides then that food is always better eaten outside with the clouds and leaves. Watermelon cut in sizes just for her, sandwiches slightly squished, and muffins in uniform wrappers. That was the first time she tasted orange juice. The cup feels big in her tiny hands. When she takes a cautious sip, the taste is bright and surprising. It is sweet at first, then a sour that makes her eyes widen. It is cold and tingly on her tongue. She laughs and claps her sticky hands, and everyone laughs with her. Her first picnic. The wave recedes. It's gone. The clock ticks.

Another wave emerges from the breakers; her first love. Her heart softens at once. They're holding each other close, hands interlaced. The night sky is vast and welcoming, and the walk home is quiet yet solid. No words are spoken, yet volumes pass between them. He laughs and without question, she laughs with him. Between them is trust, love, and loyalty. Her first love. The image dissolves into the salty waters. Lights pulse. The sun is setting.

She walks along the shoreline, revisiting the memories that shaped her lifetime. The silk sash that titled her valedictorian of high school slips through her fingers. Wedding bells chime in her ears. Her first paycheck, heavy with pride. She pulls bow across the strings of her violin. Her first babe is crying in her arms as she rocked him to dreamland. The pain when she fractures her toe while bowling. Losing a loved one to a pandemic. Believing in Santa and Christmas magic. Seven minutes to hold it all.

Finally, her eighty-third birthday. Her last birthday. She has lived through eighty-three Aprils. Eighty-three Christmases. Everyone is smiling, and someone is holding a cake, candles alight. Happy birthday rings through the room, as the sun sets outside, bleeding colours into the steadily darkening sky.

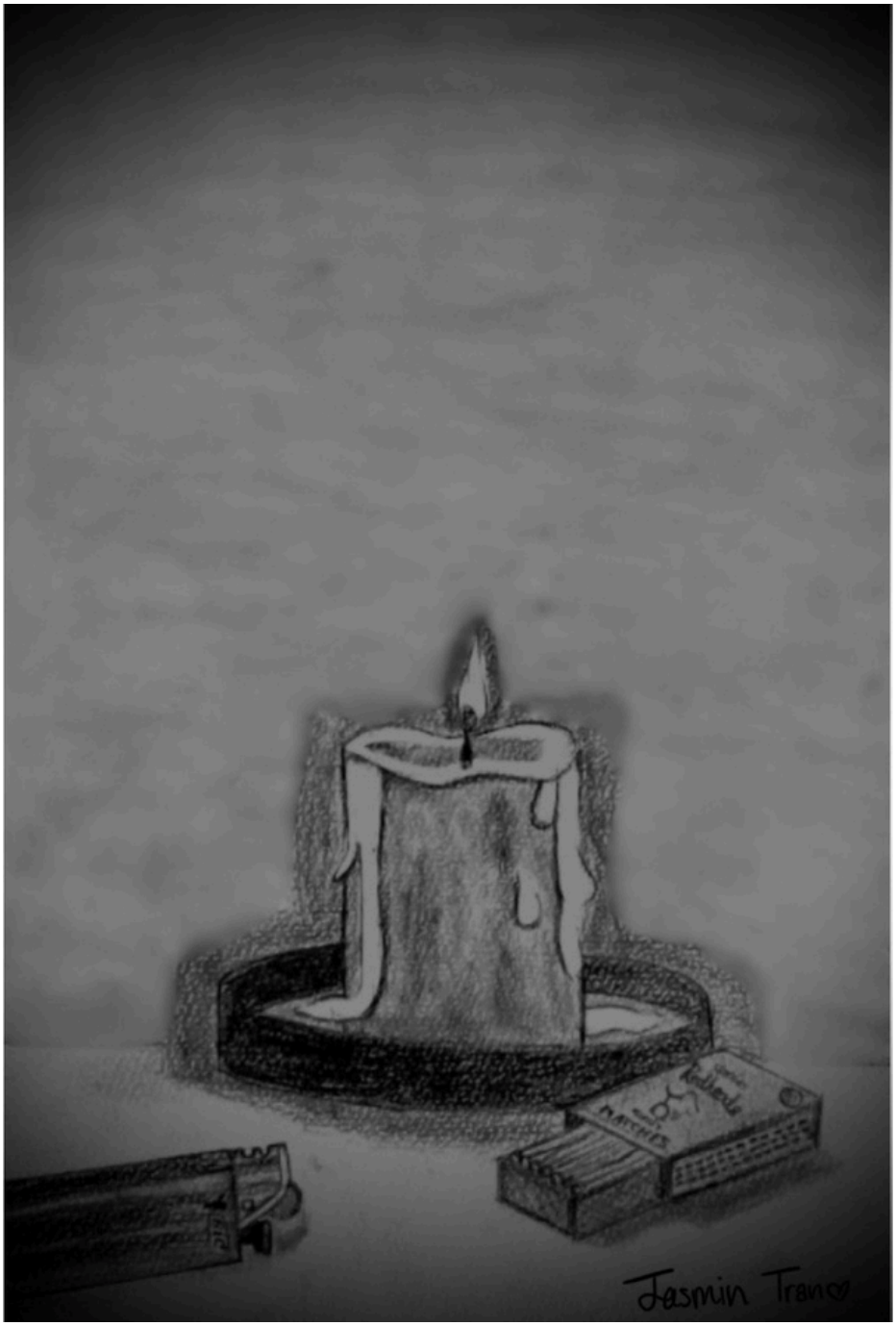
"Make a wish!" Her granddaughter urges.

She breaks into a smile; soft, knowing. Her eyes crinkle deeply at the corners, folding into lines carved by decades of laughter. She can only describe the feeling as happiness. Pure happiness. A wish? She already has everything she could ever bargain for. The image begins to fade into darkness. Around her, the sun slips under the horizon. Night is coming.

She chuckles softly. She has lived a long life. A good life. Her eyes gradually close.

Seven minutes.

Art by Jasmin Tran



The candle in my sketch symbolises a person's life and time passing. The melted wax spilled in the candle dish is the evidence of living, showing that life can be chaotic and messy. The lighter and matches symbolises people and experiences that have shaped the candle over time. This piece shows that over the burning of time and unpredictable experiences,it still creates an enduring light that shines brightly through the darkness.

A Slice of Life

By Rosemerry Ali

Evie was good at playing Tetris. Usually.

She normally played games online, with brightly coloured blocks and an even brighter screen. Not this time. Today, she was playing a real-life game of Tetris, except instead of blocks, she had...well, blocks. Blocks of butter, to be specific. And blocks of sugar, and cartons of milk and eggs, and a bag of flour that was so stuffed it may as well have been a block itself. All piled high on her kitchen countertop like a game she – or rather, she and her hapless friends - were about to lose.

"Hey, bro! Whatcha doin' over here?"

"Ah!" Evie yelped. She craned her head back to the doorway, only to see a girl standing at the entrance with golden hair, holding a pink umbrella in one hand and a suspiciously large bag of chocolate chips in the other. Just then, Evie remembered: she'd invited her friends over to bake a cake alongside her, and only one of them had a pink umbrella and a deep-seated love for everything cocoa. Zoe?

"Zoe!"

"Yep, the one and only. Guess what I have?" she said, strutting to the countertop and dangling the bag of chocolate in front of their eager eyes.

"Nice!" Evie replied, glancing at the recipe on the Tetris pile, "But this cake recipe says it's vanilla flavoured."

"Who cares, man? It's open to interpretation."

"It's literally a recipe, but sure. Let's see what we need...a cup of sugar, half a cup of unsalted butter..." Evie muttered carefully, as if afraid of skipping a word.

"No need to read all of that. You and I both know we can follow instructions, unlike someone."

A voice came from behind the wall. "Did someone mention me?" Just then, a face, framed with a burgundy scarf, peered into the kitchen and stared at the two girls...and the growing pyramid of ingredients between them. "What in the Tetris is going on here?"

"Speak of the devil!" Zoe exclaimed.

"Hey, Aisha, come here! We're making the cake batter right now." Evie added.

Aisha scampered over and eyed the bag of chocolate chips in Zoe's hand, saying "Forget that. We have dessert already." She flopped onto a chair beside the kitchen counter, sprawled across the seat, and began to inhale the sweet, sweet chocolate as if it was air, oblivious to the world around her.

Evie raised an eyebrow. "Uh...Aisha?"

"I'm too busy eating my pre-dessert dessert, this had better be important."

"Your hijab is in the batter."

"My what?" Aisha leapt out of her seat and ran past the oven, throwing herself at the kitchen sink. Zoe chuckled, snatched her precious bag back and dumped its contents into the bowl, watching as the chocolate chips vanished into the batter like stars sinking into the sky at dawn. Though she was sad to see them go, she knew that – eventually anyway – they would evolve into something more than simple chocolate, combined into an even more delicious (if that was possible!) cake.

Upon seeing the abandoned batter, Evie flew to the kitchen counter. Setting a baking tray down, she poured it in slowly, watching as the chocolate chips emerged from the bottom of the bowl and landed, once again, at the top of its new container. The oven door opened, ready to gobble up the new creation – though it'd be forced to give its food up later on. Evie watched the soon-to-be cake slip into the oven as she bobbed up and down like a buoy in the sea.

Aisha cackled at the sight. "Wow, look at you! Future ballerina over here, am I right?"

"It's called my microwave dance, Aisha," Evie laughed, "very aesthetically pleasing, I know."

"That ain't a microwave!" Aisha added. "It's an oven!"

"Microwave, or oven, or whatever. Tomato, tomato. Same thing."

"Tomatoes? Ew." Zoe replied, staring at the oven. The heat radiated onto her face as she watched the cake rise under orange lights. When the timer rang, she ironically looked like a tomato herself. Hearing the noise, Evie ran to the freshly baked dessert and slid it out for her friends to see. Smoke rose from the tray, perfuming the kitchen with the smell of decadence, bliss, and, for Aisha at least, opportunity.

Aisha smiled mischievously. "Twelve servings, was it, Evie? Alright then, one slice on the plate it is. So that means I can eat...let's see...a whole eleven slices of delicious and sweet cake, just for me!"

"Just for you?"

"I wanna live a little, dude! Life is short."

"I'll shorten your life even more if you don't give me some!" Zoe cried with indignation. She sprinted out from behind the countertop, chasing the culprit with fire in her eyes.

So there they went, with Aisha sprinting as fast as her legs would go with a tray of freshly cooked dessert in her hands, Zoe hot on her heels, and Evie still standing behind the countertop, choreographing her "microwave, or oven, or whatever" dance for all the kitchen to see. The recipe fluttered in the wind from outside the window, no longer hidden under the Tetris pile of now-emptied ingredient containers. It read:

INGREDIENTS:

- 300g plain flour
- 2 ½ tsp baking powder
- ¼ tsp salt
- 4 large eggs
- 300g fine sugar
- 115g unsalted butter
- 250mL full fat milk
- 3 tsp vanilla extract
- 3 tsp vegetable oil

HOW TO MAKE THE BEST CAKE EVER, BY EVIE, AISHA AND ZOE (definitely chefs):
Step 1: Preheat oven to 180°C before preparing batter.
Step 2: Grease cake pans with butter, then line with baking paper.
Step 3: Whisk all flour, salt and baking powder together in a large bowl and set aside.
Step 4: Beat eggs for 30 seconds with either mixer or by hand, then slowly add sugar while beating. Whisk until egg and sugar mixture triples in size.
Step 5: Place butter and milk together into a heatproof bowl, then microwave until butter is fully melted.
Step 6: When egg mixture is fully whipped, slowly add dry ingredients while mixing. When no flour is visible, stop mixing the batter immediately.
Step 7: Pour batter into pans and bang each pan on the counter to remove large bubbles in batter.
Step 8: Bake 30 minutes at 180°C or until golden and solid in the middle (chopstick poked into middle comes out clean)
Step 9: Enjoy! (And give me all your cake. – Aisha)

Almost Human

By Jolie Tang
Art by Elysia Kim

Clink.

Spiderwebs spread across the block like dancers in a waltz.

Clink.

Dust poured from the cracks like a shower of meteors.

Thump.

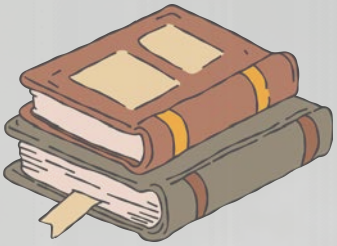
Marble splits from the stone, shattering against the floor.
The rocks splinter across the terracotta tiles, echoing with a sharp clang, as if announcing its demise not just to the hallway, but to the world.
A muted sigh followed suit.
The grip on the hammer loosened slightly, yet the chisel remained tightly clutched. The limbs felt wrong, too sharp, too heavy, too unrefined but they'd had to make do. At least for a while.
With a heaving chest—or at least one trying to—the tools were awkwardly lifted, a fragile movement that sent free a flutter of dust.
The specks drifted down slowly, settling on top one another like gentle snowflakes.
Clink. Clink. Clink.
With each swing, the forearms ached like a dull fire, every muscle straining with effort. It felt as if the gentle taps had caused waves—tremors even—that shook through the plinth's foundation.
Even the most minuscule impact sent shockwaves across the arms.
The strokes came down harshly like blunt daggers, screeching in protest as they tore through with an unsatisfying, uneven finish.
Another block broke off, releasing a strangled cry. It was one flooded by misery, coated in pain as the tools tore off chunk after chunk of limbs.
The creation continued.
Slowly, the body gained shape, peeking through layers upon layers of jagged teeth, each coated a deathly pale. This time, the strikes came down firm and confident, no longer impossible to move. They embraced perfection. They culled everything else.
Lust, gluttony, greed.
It struck again.
Sloth, wrath...envy.
As the last strike swung, dust burst out, burning into its eyes, scratching down its throat and flooding its lungs. Like a cloud of flames, the raging inferno blazed. Yet, the hammering continued, unbothered, unmoved. It rang like a steady metronome, at the tempo of a heartbeat.
Finally, the hammer was discarded. In its place held a tightly gripped rasp. Its metal tip rubbed against marble, sliding first forth, then back, then forth again. Each stroke coaxed out new details —first the fingers, then the nails, knuckles, veins until the stone poured like blood, bled like flesh and looked like...a hand.

A human hand.
Almost.
Unsightly scars still adorned the skin where it should've been smooth, soft, surreal even. Blemishes that tainted its corporeality like thorns on an otherwise immaculate rose.
A sharp tear ripped through the air as sheets of sandpaper rubbed down, filing away the uneven edges. The burns melted its arms, reducing skin to ash in mere seconds.
It wasn't enough.
It couldn't be.
The once beautiful fingers morphed into ugly fangs, digging through its scalp, ripping at its nape, clawing out chunks of flesh. Uncontrollably. A never-ending rain of dust began to pour down, enclosing the sculpture with a ring of itself.
The fixing continued.
Carve. Fix. Carve. Fix. Carve. FIX. Ca-
A blur of colours flashed across the floor.
It glanced down.
There, stood a man just behind the tiles, his posture poised, his anatomy flawless, his eyes shallow orbs. The paragon mirrored its movement, yet refining them with an elegant precision, an unfathomable grace, a wondrous perfection.
The man was perfect.
The man was him.
An odd chill washed over and with a start, the sculpture looked down to see his fingers trembling, their tips rubbed raw. The hammer remained tightly clutched in his palm, yet its handle drooped slightly with a weight suddenly too heavy to bear. He locked eyes with his reflection, burning onto every minuscule detail from the locks of sleek, straight hair to the dust clinging onto his lashes. Hesitantly, his gaze wavered, landing on the worktable, now a chaotic mess of equipment—worn gouges, chipped boasters, misshapen rifflers. Their tips lay dull and flat, hollow shells of their former grandeur.
The man looked away, rubbing at the burn from his cheeks. An uncomfortable pang spread through his chest as his breaths hitched.
He had gone too far.
He had reached too high.
***
The hardest part was letting go. Dropping the sandpaper, putting down the files, turning away from the tools. Only his heel remained fixed, bulking at an awkward angle. He hadn't even noticed until his eyes had glanced down. The movement had felt unconscious, natural almost.
His eyes bore onto the ankle.
A final flaw. His only fault.
The man looked away. His right leg lifted forwards, ready to step off the plinth, ready to move ahead.
Then, he paused.
His hand found the hammer.
Thump.
Thump.
Thump.



Life in Their Eyes

By Vy Byrne



A thick layer of dust sits on top of the box I'm unpacking. The beams of light seep through the cracks in the roof. Boxes line the walls and the smell of must settles in. I pry open the cardboard box and view the items inside. There is a colored lamp, a jar containing colorful beads and a few tattered notebooks. I reach in and open one.

21st June 1944

The war has been very long. The conditions are bad for us. Even here in Australia. I don't want to know how long this has been going on for. Around 3 years I think. I hope Germany surrenders soon. By living through this war I understand that life is hard. Going through this and now I understand. Understand what everyone meant when they say, "You don't know how lucky you are." Going through the hardship. I just want to make it through this...

I place the notebook down. I wonder if they did make it through. Through the hardship that they faced. I root through the box and reach for another one.

24th November 1918

The plague has been going on for very long. Momma and Poppa have been sick for a long time, I'm scared they won't get better, me and sister Caroline will be orphans. Our caretaker keeps telling us it's going to be okay. It struck one day, out of nowhere. Suddenly Momma and Poppa fell ill, the doctors don't know how to cure them. The plague can even strike the richest in Spain, Momma and Poppa have the best doctors with them and they still won't get better. I don't want to get sick, I need to stay safe for Caroline. Life is too short. I know many of the Spanish population have died already. I need to stay okay for Caroline, even if Momma and Poppa don't make it I need to stay safe.

My hand shakes as I lay it on the floor. My eyes start to water. I gently close the books and leave them in the box.

I shut the box and leave it against the wall. I lean against a stack of boxes and think. Think about the stories. Life is too short. Savour each moment and treasure it. I continue to read each story, a soldier, a victim of the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. Each story, I am reminded of hardship, of how lucky I really am.

Life through War by Annabel Bowden and Elina Kim

To my dearest father, 14/01/1917

I take up the pen with a heavy heart and a trembling hand to send word from this shaking cabin. The War has proven a most cruel master so far, and the events of the past few days have been so horrendous, I wish to recount what has happened. The German president has been as vulgar as ever. The bombs from the German army have been spread everywhere nonstop, especially Verdun. I quiver with fear as does my younger sister as we narrowly miss death itself. We stay up all night imagining all the possible things that could happen during this war. Sometimes it is quite exhausting to take care of my sister, but I endure it because our lives are at stake. I pray that one day I will return to you and mother.

Your son,
William Simmons

To my dearest father, 18/08/1917

I'd never thought the war would get worse, but it did. There is no food, no shelter, no nothing. The Germans have bombed Verdun until there was nothing left except dust. Me and my sister ran away until our feet ached with pain and turned bloody. The most we will survive is 2 weeks. Even now, I write with my spare paper from the notebook you gave me. Are you proud of me? I'm taking care of my little sister while trying to be a man, but it's hard when I'm only nine. Everyone looks terrified, horrified and pale... If war continues like this, what will happen to the future? Anyway, I'll try to survive this mess as much as I can.

Your son,
William Simmons

To my dearest father, 05/02/1918

I never thought this would happen, but war is getting better. There is far less bombing, and I also found an abandoned small shack in the forest which was stacked with stale bread. Even though I try to ration the portions between me and my sister, but we always end up eating a little more. The forest is covered with berry bushes and has a gushing river down a little to the west. This life is as good as it can get during war. Even though we still live in fear, I feel happy when I think war is about to end. As soon as war ends, I'll promise to try and find you and mother. Make sure to wait for us.

Your son,
William Simmons



To my dearest father, 20/11/1 918

I'm coming to find you father. I will reunite with you and mother after so many years living in terror. I have finally rose from the shadows and when I did, war had officially ended. I don't walk when I try to find you I run. The excitement in my body has me nearly exploding. I'm always smiling no matter what I'm doing. My little sister follows and she's also dancing with joy. Father, did you also smile when the war ended like I did? Did you and mother tremble with glee like I did? I hope you recognise me when I find you. I imagine you'll welcome me with open arms and praise me for my bravery . I'll finally feel like I'm home. In heart and outside heart. Don't worry father I'm nearly there.

Your son,
William Simmons

To my dearest father, 07/ 09/1922

I know I've already found you, but I would like to write a few more letters for you in the notebook. I now live at a farm with you, mother and my sister , while living the life I thought could never exist . Everything is perfect now. We laugh, we dance and we feast like royalty. I still have nightmares from the events of the war. However, I'm healing with you and mother by my side. You comfort me when I cry and teach me how to become like you. I cannot express in word s my love for you. Even though you get angry at me sometimes because some silly thing, I still love you with all my heart. One day, I'll become as good as you. Your son,
William Simmons

To my dearest father , 26/03/1936

I am now 28 and celebrate my birthday with my pregnant wife. She is expecting in about three months, and I can't wait to meet my son. I will teach him everything you taught to me . I will never leave his side until I part ways with him because of death. Is this unconditional love? Is this what you felt like when you had me? My sole purpose in life is and forever will be my son. Life's purpose doesn't mean just living, it means sharing time with the people you love and creating unforgettable memories which can be good or bad. Father, I finally understand now .

Your son,
William Simmon





Art By Elina Kim for Life Through War

Story by Leen Bilal

“What are you doing!”

The shrill voice pierced my dream, shattering my brief escape from the world.

“Get out of my doorway, you filthy urchin! Why are you even here?” I could feel the dull throb echoing through my limbs, the taptaptap muffled by my frayed woollen overcoat. A man was kicking at me, shoving me off the threshold. The rigid wooden frame slammed into my back. I looked up at him, my eyes stretched wide in terror. The lessening rain gently pattered behind me. Something felt odd.

My cheeks prickled in the cold night.

I could feel the wind on my face.

I could never feel the wind on my face. My hands rushed up to my face.

Cold fingers met my porcelain cheeks.

No mask.

My fingers desperately searched the sopping concrete and before he could see, I snatched it off the floor and jammed it over my face.

I couldn’t be caught now. Not when I was so close.

Scrambling to my feet, I examined the rest of me. You couldn’t see any cracks. I stuffed my threadbare blanket into my tattered backpack, preparing to flee. He was still in the doorway, but I could hear fear seeping into his voice. His stance was no longer irritated, but apprehensive. Scared.

I hadn’t hidden it fast enough.

He’d seen the cracks on my face. The ivory skin.

It was only matter of seconds before his mind returned to reality. A matter of seconds before the inevitable.

I turned and ran.

I didn’t stop running through the city, the tall skyscrapers looming over me, until I found an empty alleyway and collapsed inside. A rat scampered past. Its light footsteps etched through the walls.

How could I be so careless? Was a dry retreat for a couple of hours really worth being discovered? I could only hope he hadn’t seen my face long enough to remember it. It may have been pouring and hailing earlier but the rain had almost stopped now. I should have left the doorway as soon as I could.

It was just the shelter was so tempting, so inviting. The sizzling of the rain was soothing, lulling me to sleep.

Sleep.

The mere hour of so called ‘rest’ in the man’s door had hardly aided my exhaustion. My lips were cracked as I licked them, a half-hearted attempt to cool the agony. My knees buckled and I sank against the rugged wall, the cement wall sinking into my back, sending shivers down my cracks. My eyes drooped like dead weights; I could hardly see what was in front of me. My china appendages clinked together





The adrenaline from the chase had faded, leaving my exhaustion to run me over like a truck. I pulled my ripped hoodie tighter around me and unpacked my excuse for a blanket, my only defences against the bitter night wind. My stomach was so empty it felt like it was digesting itself. The ground scratched my porcelain hands, pricking my palms with cold.

This had gone on for as long as I could remember: the endless hunger, the hopelessness, the abandonment. Eventually it faded to a kind of numbness.

The cracks meant I couldn't die.

Not until the next age.



It was the last day of this age, the last day of my short, 15-year-old life, my last day on this world that would never accept me, simply because I had cracks on my skin, because I was born on the unlucky day. From the moment I was born, before anyone had even seen my face, I was dubbed as malicious and evil. The cracks broke my face in half, marking me as cursed. Every face I had ever encountered had quickly gone from pity and disgust to fear as soon as they had seen mine. I had learnt long ago that the only way to survive was to hide.

Because as bad as life on the run was, it would never compare to the unimaginable torture awaiting me if captured.

I had survived this long with out being found. My time was almost up, the thud of my heart counting down the seconds to my death.

Counting down to when I would finally be released from such a heartless world.

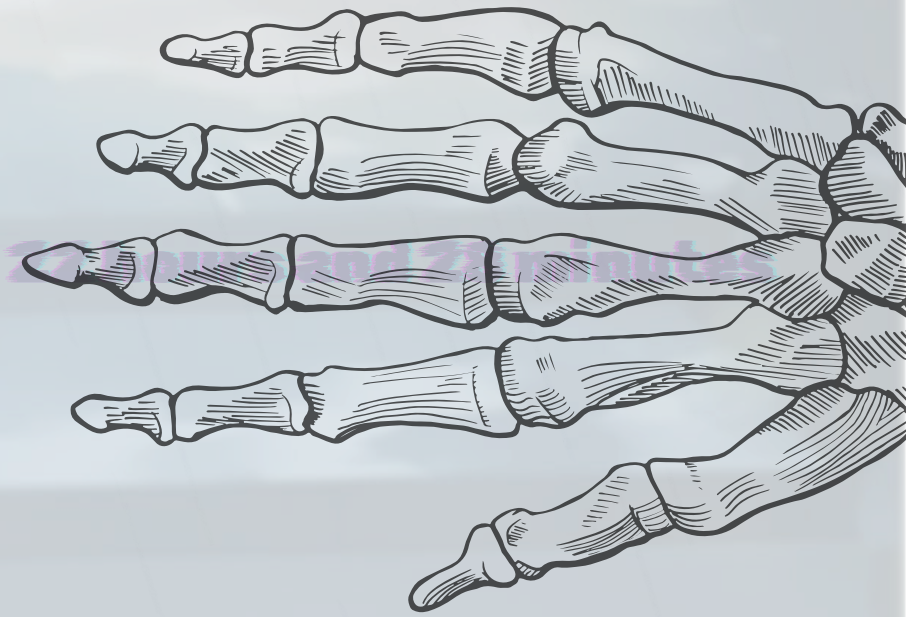
I leaned against the wall. exhaustion tugged at my eyelids. The city was at its most silent, only the occasional car engine echoing through the street. A neon digital clock at the convenience store across the street read "01:32" . The shadows of the alley cloaked me in darkness, but I checked for visible cracks anyway.

The silence seeped beneath my bones. Sleep finally took over my paranoia.

22 hours and 28 minutes until midnight.

22 hours and 28 minutes until escape





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