

SARA KHALIL-BAYLEY



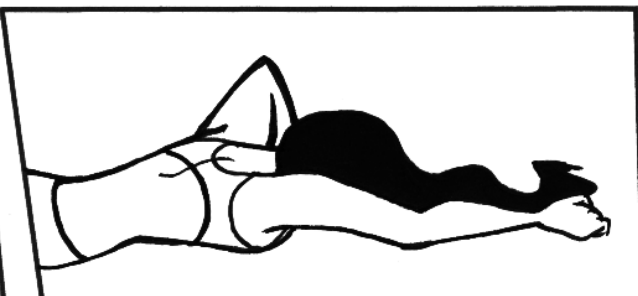
SO LONG AS I'M
HUMAN

"What does it mean to be human?"

To be of flesh,



and bone—



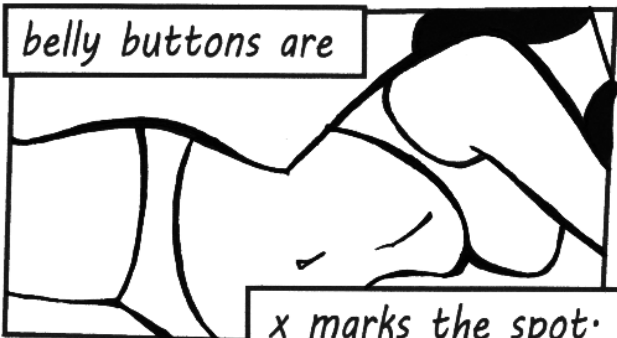
skin trailing with patterns we cannot begin to understand.

Head of hair

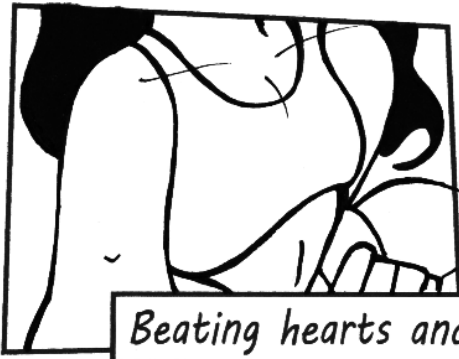


and eyes that see,

belly buttons are



x marks the spot.



Beating hearts and shaking hands.



To be fragile? To be strong?

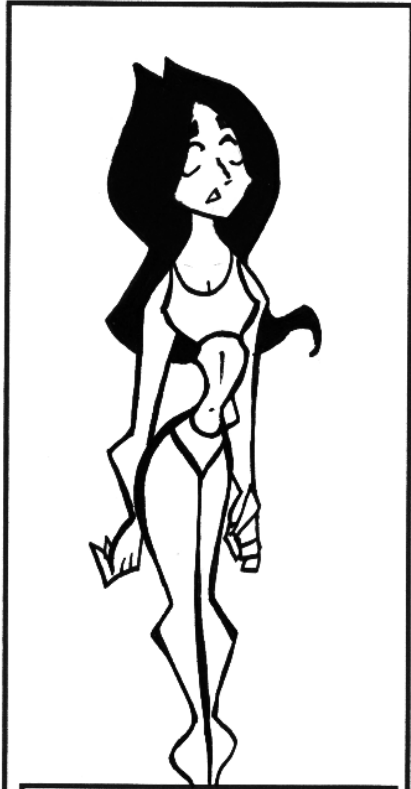


To stand up— against what?

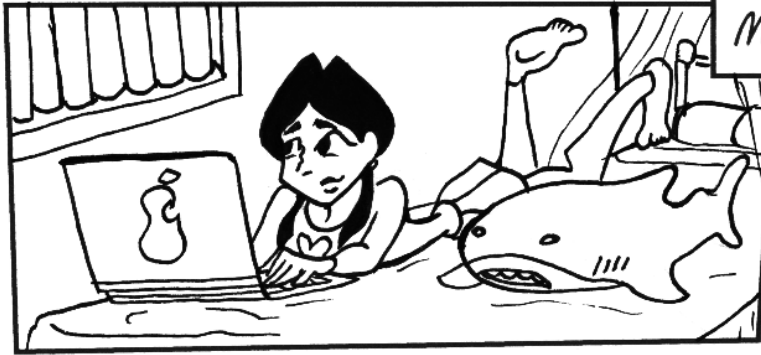
Who am I?

What am I doing?

Am I doing it **right**?



Do I qualify as a human being...?



My name is Sara.

I am a nineteen year old drama queen, and I have just started to ask myself this question.

His name is Osamu Dazai.

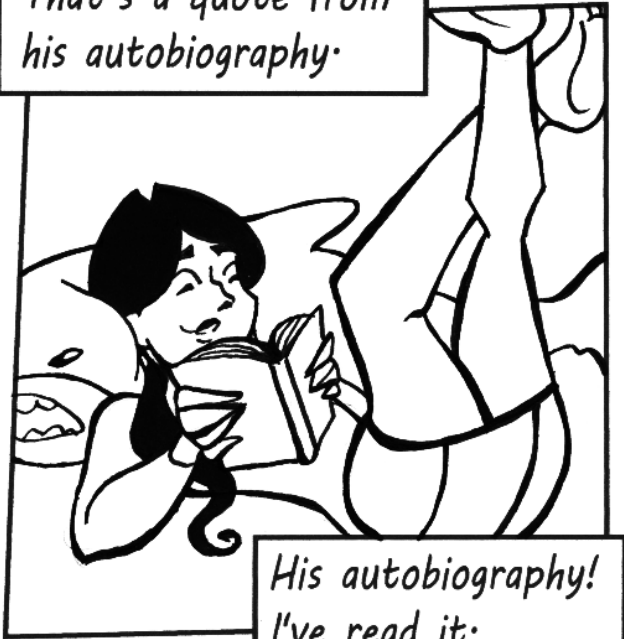
He is a great writer from Japan, who wrote a whole book asking himself the same.



"I can't even guess myself what it must be to live the life of a

human being."

That's a quote from his autobiography.

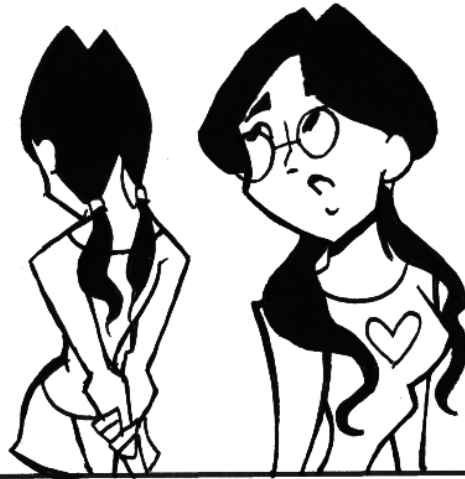


His autobiography! I've read it.



I like to write novels too, and I think making yourself the main character is a brave thing to do.

To hate yourself
so much and still
feel you're worth
writing about...



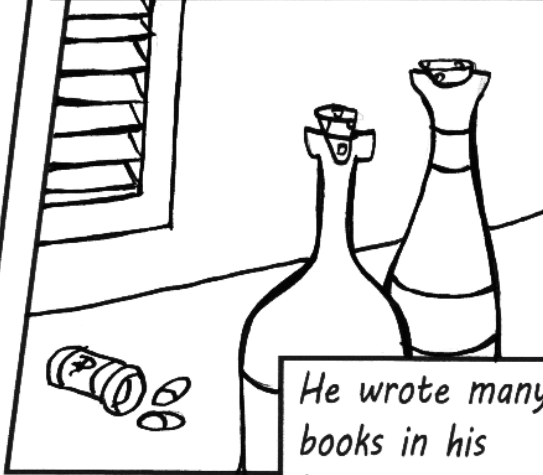
He and I are nothing alike,

is what I should say.
He's renowned, famous,



from a country I might
not ever set foot in.

He lived through two world wars,
and was depressed almost all his life.

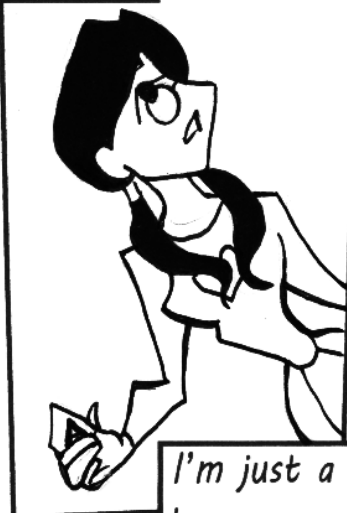


He wrote many
books in his
lifetime,



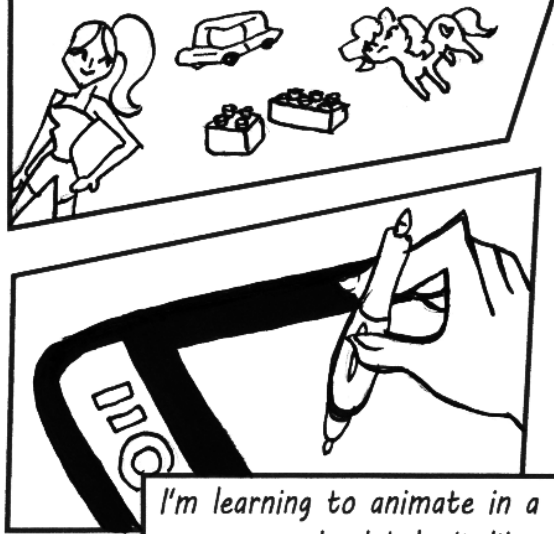
and
they're the
subject of
studies by
hundreds of
scholars.

But me?



I'm just a
teenager—

I like the color pink and plastic toys.



I'm learning to animate in a
school I don't like,

and I'm from three different
countries which is almost like
being from none at all.



It's a matter of happenstance

But I did read it.

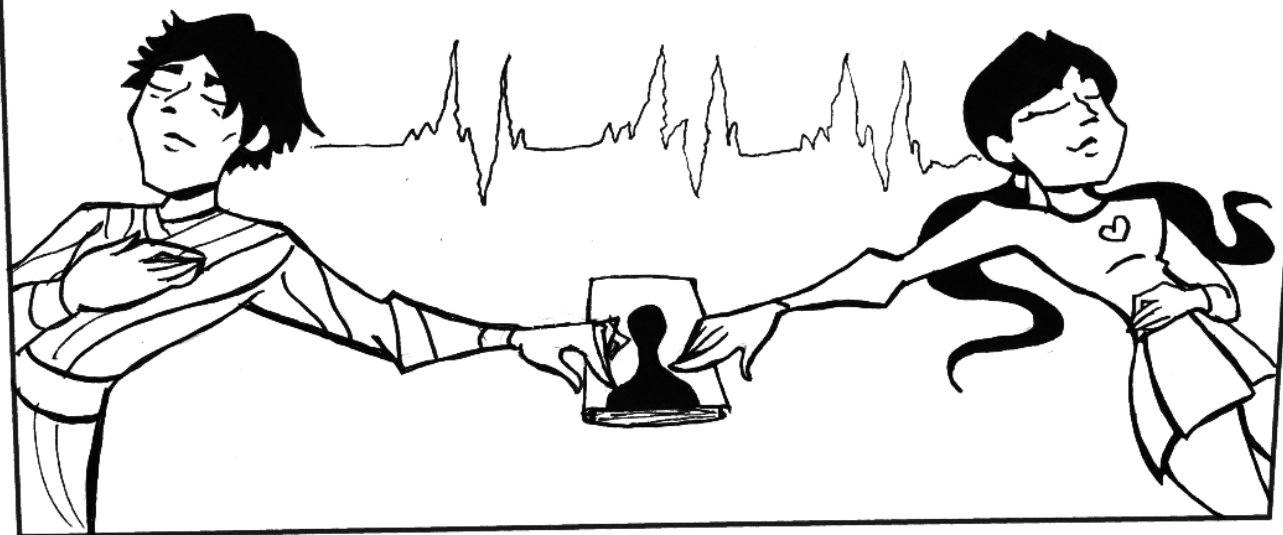
that I even read his book.

And like a lot of people, I did like it.



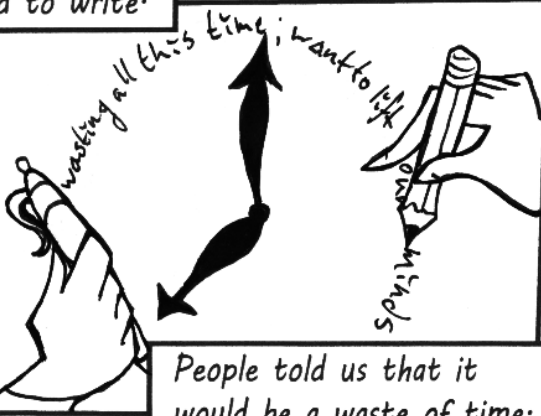
And I think it's because — this man, Dazai, despite writing about himself...

He managed to touch some common ground.



We're alike, in some ways. We made the same mistakes.

We liked to write:



People told us that it would be a waste of time.

We liked to paint.



People told us that our paintings were ugly.

We spent all our time crying,



longing for someplace to belong to.

And sometimes, we fell in love...



And oftentimes, we'd fall in love with the wrong person.



"As for love...no, having once written that word I can write

nothing more."

Maybe some of the things Dazai went through that he thought were so exclusive to him,



that made him feel so lonely...

And I wish someone would've told him it's okay that he felt that way. Loneliness is a human emotion.

Is what touched so many people in the end.

Even with the world at my fingertips,



I find it's easy to feel like I'm the only one who hurts like this.

Dazai thought there was something **wrong** with him.



Dazai believed all his life, that he was simply a failure — that he didn't deserve to live at all.

I think there's something wrong with me, too.



I don't believe I was born that way, though, unlike Dazai — in my case,

it happened over time.

I spent a large chunk of my life, alone, far away from where I considered home...



And slowly but surely, bit by bit, I forgot how to be a person.

How do you solve that?

Dazai would do this thing called "pretending."

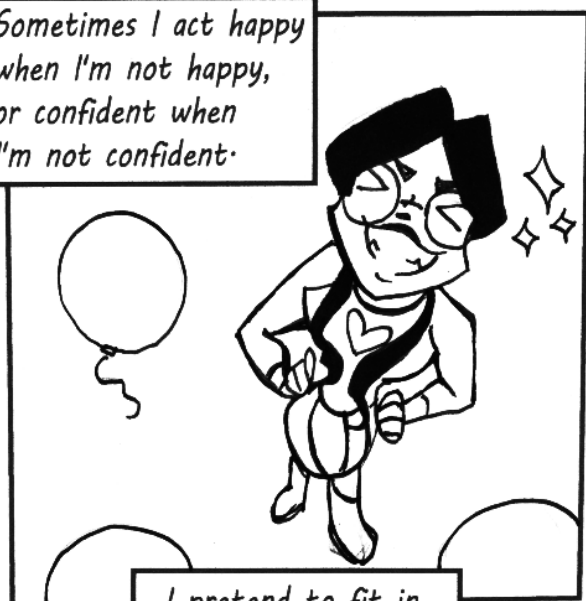


He would "pretend" to be human, so no one caught onto the fact that he wasn't.



I like to pretend too.

Sometimes I act happy when I'm not happy, or confident when I'm not confident.



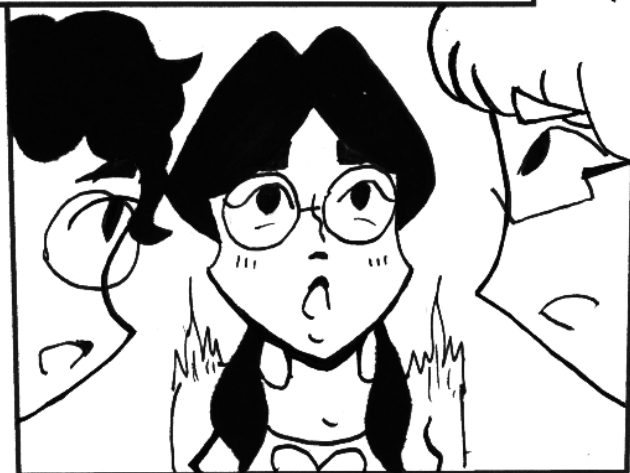
I pretend to fit in...

And I act like I am a person, and that I, of course, know exactly how to act around people in any situation.



Why wouldn't I?

And then, when it slips, and people notice that I said the wrong thing —



it's very easy to make a joke and act like it's just a quirk of mine.

Dazai did that, too,
he loved to joke around.



It's a great way to make sure
people don't worry about you.

"As long as I can make them laugh, it doesn't matter how, I'll be

all right."



But... He called it a facade. Fake.
He believed that he was a faker.



Am I faking it, too? When people see
me, do they see me as I really am?

I think so.

Forcing kindness to
someone I don't like,

Or myself not to swear
when I stub my toe.



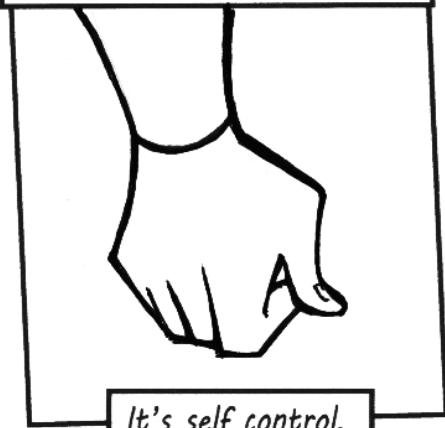
I think I *am* forcing
things, sometimes, yes.



I think that's human, too,

because there's a word for it: agency.

But having agency isn't faking.



It's self control,

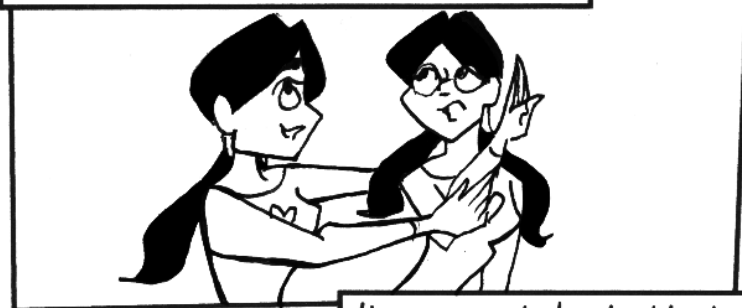


it's manners,



it's the things we
teach ourselves to do.

A decision you make on your own behalf.



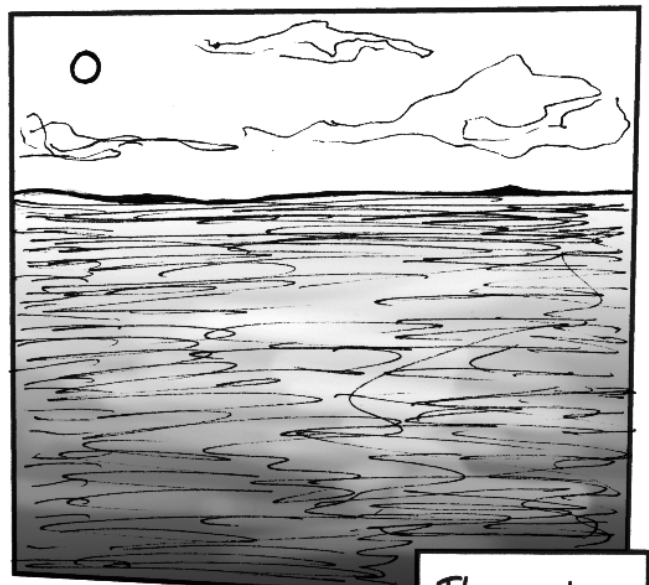
It may not be instinct,

but there's nothing wrong with people
not knowing everything you're thinking.



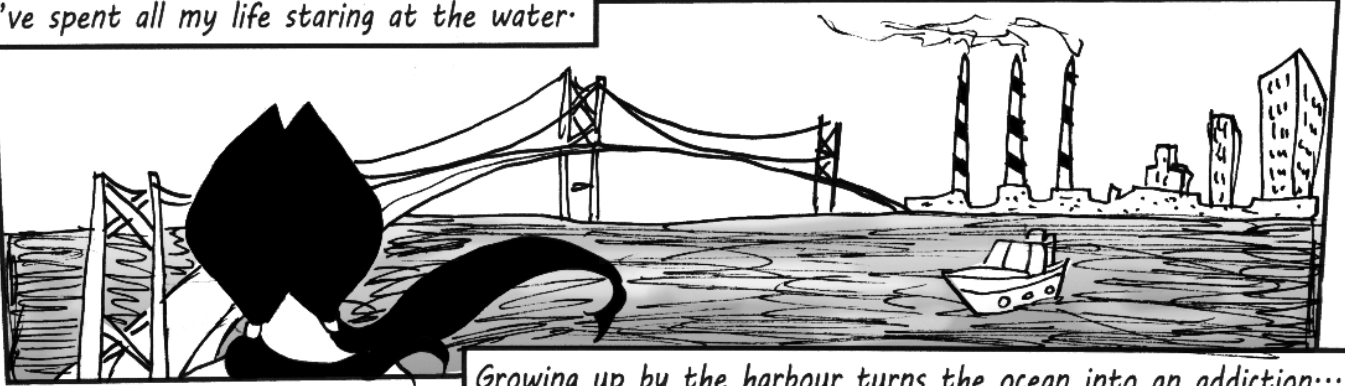
I wish someone had
told him this, too.

If nothing else, there's one more thing
Dazai and I had in common...



The water.

I've spent all my life staring at the water.



Growing up by the harbour turns the ocean into an addiction...

I know exactly what it feels like to crave the water.

To ache for it.



To long for something you can never go back to.



To wish you could simply throw yourself into it and never feel any hurt again.

I wonder if that's how he felt.



He must have felt something similar, because he threw himself into the ocean over and over again. He tried that a lot.

He lived close to the water, so it was easier for him.



That's the kind of thing you start to envy.

The third time he succeeded. He and his lover disappeared together.



Except...

You won't find this in books or the news.



They'll describe it to you like Romeo and Juliet,

and they'll leave this out so you see him as another tragic writer and nothing more.



But they found something on Dazai's body when it washed up onto shore.

A red rope...



Marks on his neck...



Dazai didn't drown himself.

Dazai was murdered.

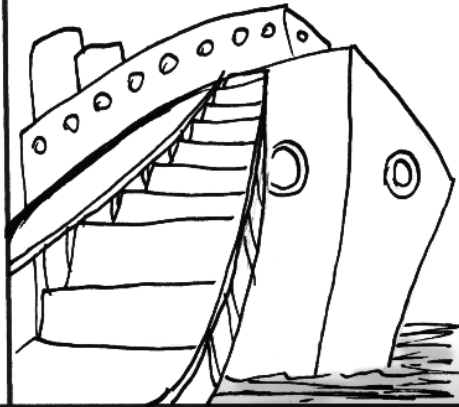


A beautiful day in summer...



My friend invited me out.

She took me out on a ferry—



A ferry! A ferry, can you believe it?
I hadn't been on a ferry in so long.

The water!



The water!



I'd get to be on the water!

I kept leaning too far over the edge of the boat,

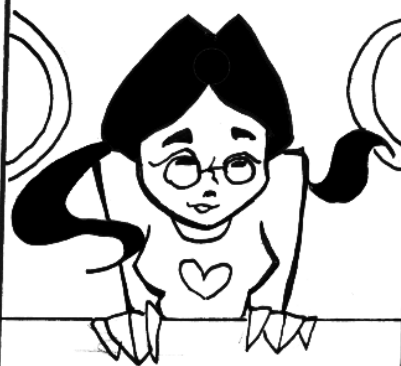


and she kept joking,

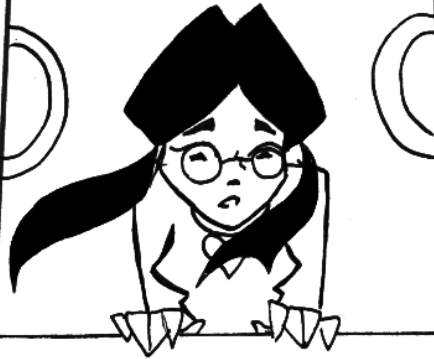


Cut it out, it's
a long way
down!

I couldn't help it,
though — it was just so...

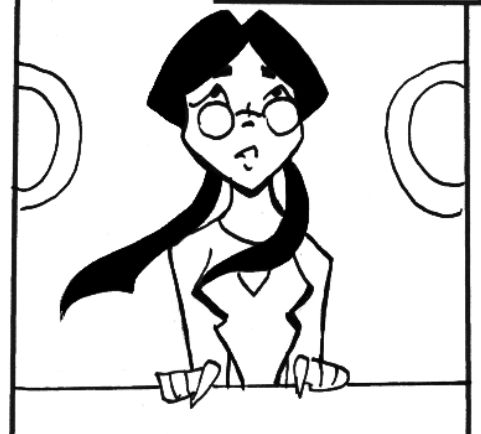


Something shifted, inside of me.



The wind changed direction,

and I pulled back.
I listened to her.



I wasn't really sure
what I was doing.

And I looked

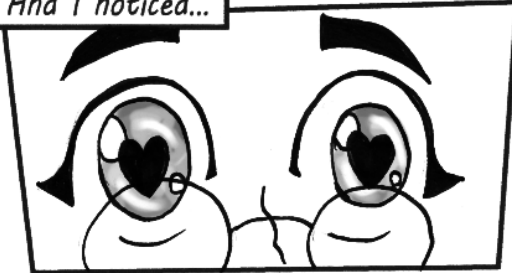


away from the water, which I'd never done before



— and I looked at the horizon, instead.

And I noticed...



The city!



I had never noticed the city before! I had lived there for some time now but somehow, I had missed it entirely...

It sparkled! It shimmered! And I thought it was even brighter than the water.



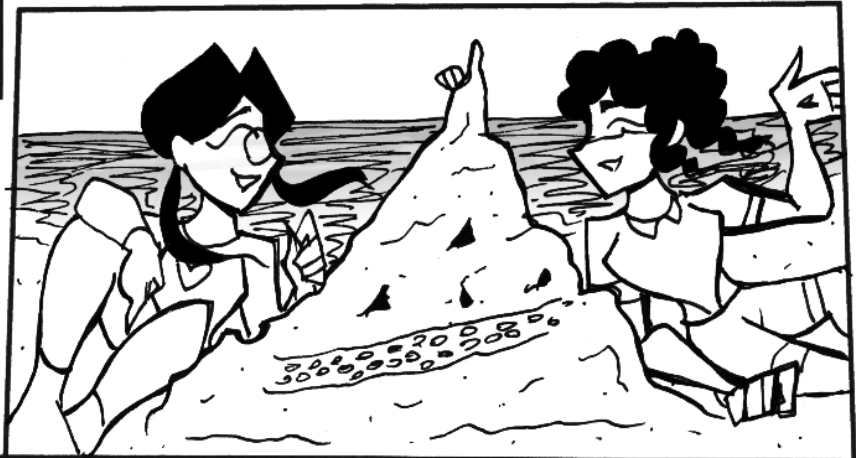
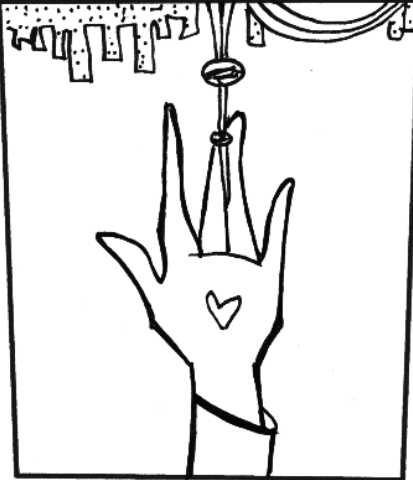
I looked at my friend and I hoped she didn't notice the tears that sprang to my eyes.



It was the first time in my life, where I looked back to shore instead of out to sea. And that meant something to me.

That was **human**.

To look out to where all the people are and wish that you were there.

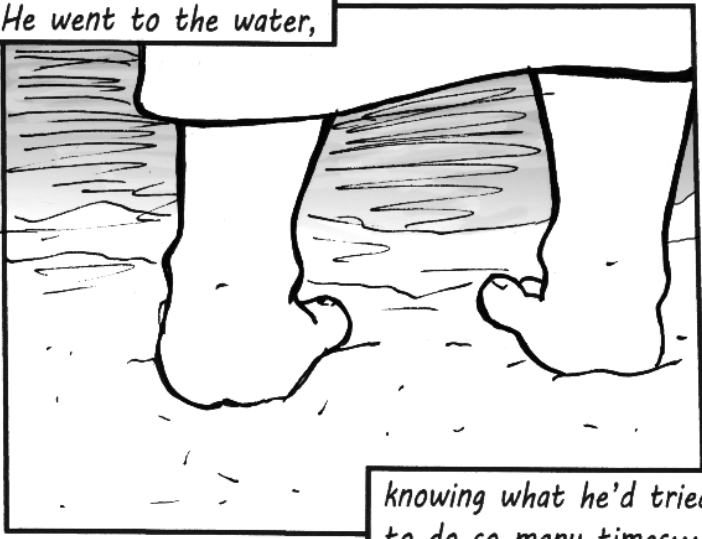


I got lucky — I got to feel that longing on a calm summer day, when everything started to seem like it'd be okay.

Dazai must have had that moment too.



He went to the water,



knowing what he'd tried to do so many times...

But he turned around,



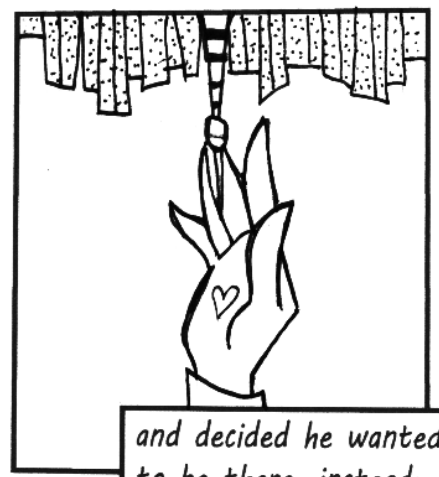
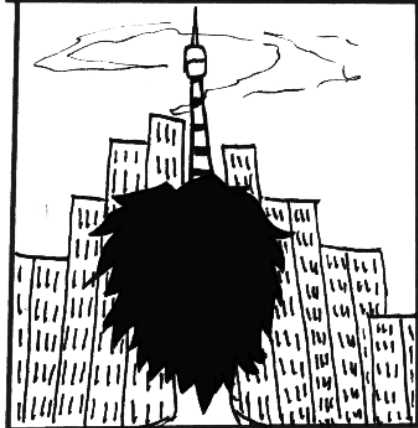
and he must've said



away from the waves,



at what he was leaving behind,



and decided he wanted to be there, instead.

He looked at the city

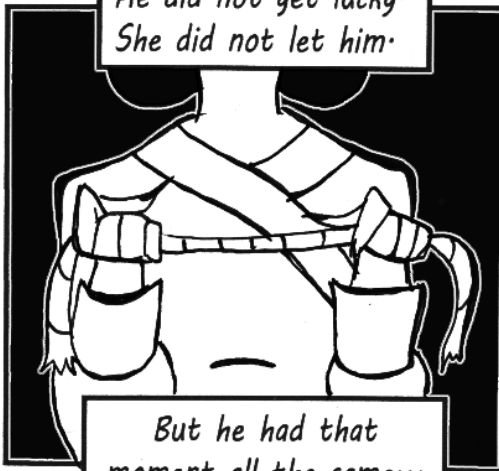


For the first time, he looked back to shore



instead of out to sea.

He did not get lucky. She did not let him.



But he had that moment all the same...

I wonder how many people had that moment, and weren't lucky enough to go home.

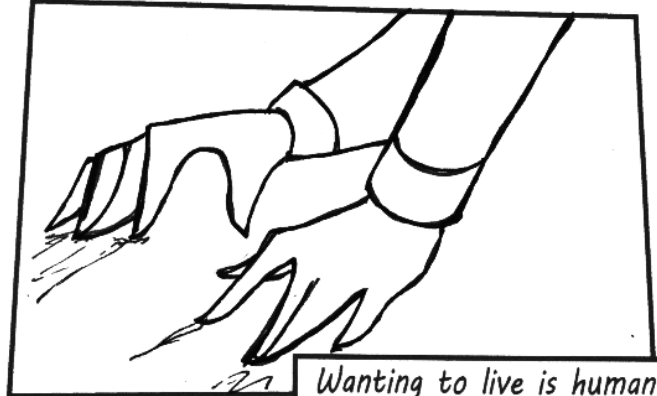
"Disqualified as a human being. I had now ceased utterly to be a

human being."

Osamu Dazai wholeheartedly believed he wasn't human.



But wishing to be happy is human.



Wanting to live is human.



Persevering despite everything is human.



It's human to look to the shore, to have that moment.



I think so, at least — I looked to his book to see if I could figure things out for myself, and I did.

I know that I am not like him in every way, if at all, so it is not my place to say who he was and what life was like for him.



But I'd like to hope that what I think matters somewhat, or I would not have written it.



Isn't storytelling very human too? No?

Well, I think being human is about...

Longing for someone who is so far away.

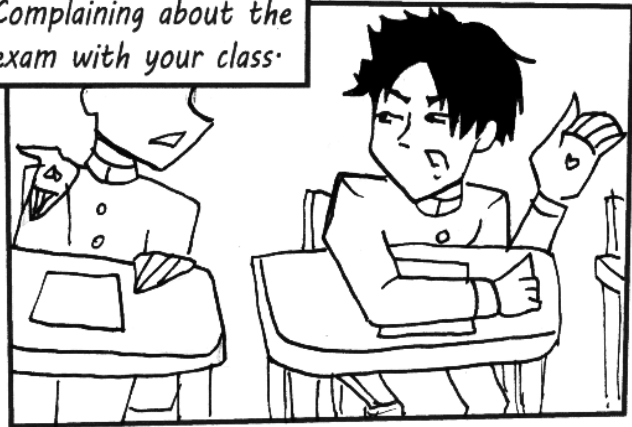


Crying because you hate how you look.

Holding an umbrella for someone in the rain.



Complaining about the exam with your class.



That shocked feeling when you pass.



Tripping and scraping your knee, bleeding.

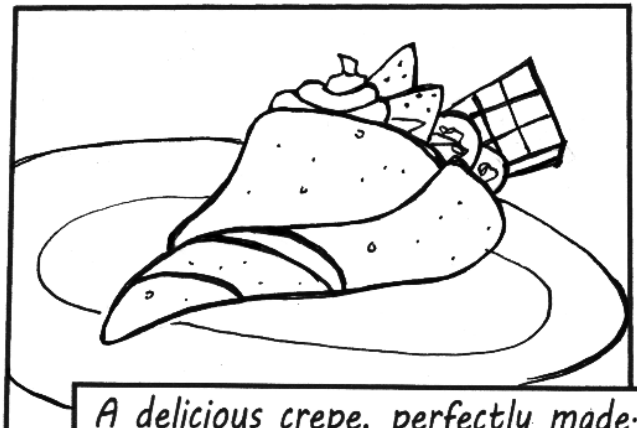
Looking forward to something in the mail.



Locking eyes with a stranger and they smile.



Thinking you could stay here a while.



A delicious crepe, perfectly made...

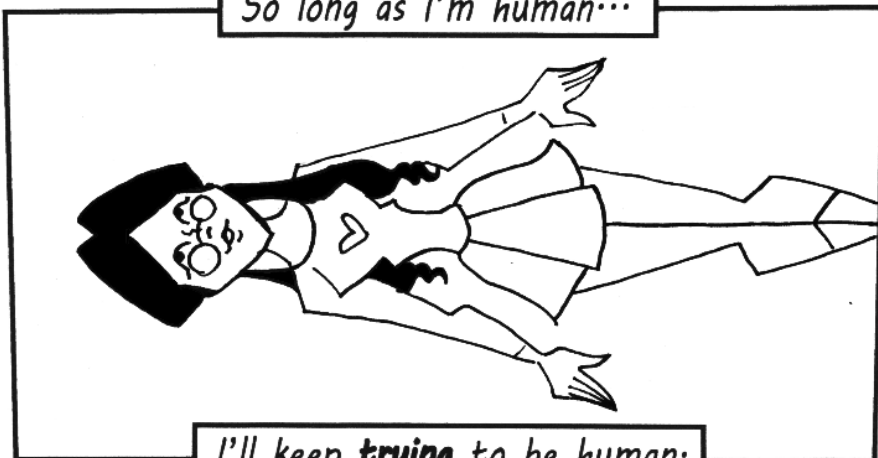
I've gone through these. I think anyone could have, without having to be a great writer like Dazai.

And every doubt we had along the way...



I think it's human to doubt, too.

So long as I'm human...



I'll keep **trying** to be human.

I'll be who I am.
I'll do what I like.



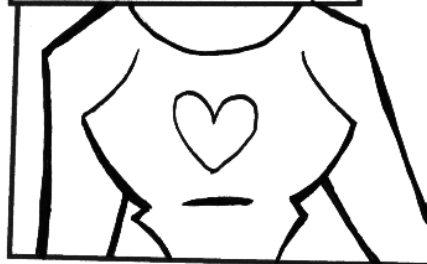
I'll hope that I'm right.

I'll be fragile.
I'll be strong.



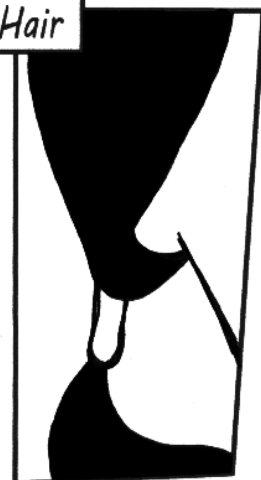
I'll stand up against what knocks me down.

With a loving heart,



and working hands.

Hair

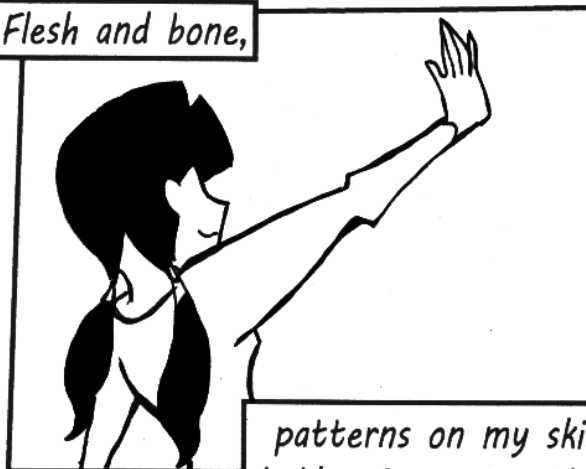


eyes



belly button.

Flesh and bone,



patterns on my skin hold a future untold.

"What does it mean to be human?"



Only a human would ask.