

Dear Osamu Dazai,

Reading *No Longer Human* was like witnessing a car crash. I wanted to look away to throw the pages bound by a hot-pink facade of mystery at the wall, shove the book under my bed and forget the morbid scene that had just unfolded before my eyes. But when we see the red and blue flashing lights ahead and the broken glass on the asphalt, we lift our foot off the accelerator. When we see an ambulance and a stretcher, we do not close our eyes, we open them wider, and when we recoil at the sight of blood, we only seem to flinch closer to the object of the horrors ahead. When we drive past the accident, we continue to look at the rear-view mirror, unable to truly move past what we had just seen. I read your novel three years ago, yet I still find my eyes lock in the rear-view mirror.

As I read through each of the journals that make up this novel, it was as though I was reading my own childhood diaries mixed with the stories of my family and friends. The question *what does it mean to be human?* Echoes in my head constantly like the booming drone of police sirens I have driven past. Yozo sees himself as an alien: unable to understand others and unable to truly connect. How many times have I felt like an alien in the brief 16 years I have been alive? My native tongue might as well sound like alienese; living in five different states and thirteen different homes, I have lived in communities where the majority was White, Hispanic, Black, or Asian, but never have I lived in an Arab community, Harira, a Moroccan soup I grew up drinking, may as well be an extraterrestrial delicacy. In one particular community I grew up in, small children told me to return to my country; children who do not yet know the machinations of the world know how to pinpoint the aliens, those who are different. This was Yozo's greatest fear: for his status as an alien to be discovered.

Being an alien pushes a long line of dominoes into collapsing. During the few days I was reading this book, a cloud hovered over my head. I could hardly drag myself out of bed, and I felt my skin was green as I walked through the front gate of my school. Each of Yozo's secret thoughts was a whisper in my heart that crescendoed to yell in my ears. Yozo is compared to a monkey in the way he smiles differently from the others around him, and in the way he makes others laugh at his own expense. Perhaps I was not a monkey, but a chameleon. I would walk through the gates and change the color of my skin to pretend I was not an alien to pretend I was a human like everyone else. A chameleon, however, can only change its color so fast, and bouncing from house to house, my true colors slipped through the camouflage, the same way Yozo's smile never felt truly authentic.

Surviving as an alien surpasses the basic necessities of food, water, and shelter. Yozo had to drown in a lake of alcohol to survive his isolation. I drown in blankets, a pond of paperwork and report cards, and a lake of little letters printed on large pieces of literature to vicariously live the lives of real human beings. Yozo failed to be sober despite the pleas of those around him; reading this novel, I wondered if I would always be drunk on my dreams, staring off into the distance, imagining myself as someone else.

As I was finishing the book, the blankets I drowned under metamorphosized into icy water, pulling me away from the minuscule comfort of my alien abode. As someone who reads books for an escape, I did not realize this book would be a portal into my own life. I saw myself in Yozo, in each shred of his isolation and desperation. The difference between us is that the journals were written by Yozo and read by me; Yozo was truly alone, but I have Yozo. I have the comfort that there are other aliens in this world, a species we can all belong to, whether our skin is black, white, brown, or yellow, our eyes open or close, and our hearts innocent or broken. We do not have to drown in our lonely lakes; we can swim together through our lives and show our true faces, rather than the fake smiles we paint on our lips to fit in.

Looking in my rear-view mirror, I see my own body being carried on the stretcher, a white cloth covering my face. Perhaps a part of me died with Yozo when I closed the book the part of me that hid from others, the part of me scared of being an alien. But as I drive forward on this road, I see aliens in the cars beside me, and I see aliens crossing the street. The cloud above me has floated away, and I feel as though I can breathe without being intoxicated by the comfort I receive from books and blankets. *What does it mean to be human?* Being human may just mean being a part of this group of aliens, driving down this road connecting even if we speak different languages and cook with different spices. I drive through each green light, and take each turn, until I find myself a picturesque lake filled with people of all hues, wearing all different types of clothing, swimming together. Reading this book is what brought me to this lake and brought me to swim with others, without hiding and without the isolation of being the sole alien drowning.

From one alien to another

Lilia Dahhak