

## Hope by Aaron Ding

The stench of desperation and hopelessness drift through the air. The hooded figure strides through the crowd, melting through the ragged people.

Gloom lurks where there is fear and darkness, lurks where there is no hope left.

That is exactly where he is – among refugees who have lost their homes and their families. Who have had their lives taken away from them, who subsist in these filthy tents with little food and contaminated water. Gloom takes lives away; Gloom darkens even the darkest alleyways. There is little hope left in the camp, just like it always has been.

An eight-year-old boy stands in the middle of the throng, dark rings under his eyes. He holds a bag of rotten fruit, weakly shouting “Apples, apples. Apples for some bread”.

Gloom bathes in the fear, the hopelessness.

He’s been here since the start. Since the massive red ship, teeming with starving people left the land of explosions and blood. Where guns were fired and houses burnt alight, with people still inside. Since it set off from the bay, bullets still puncturing its hull. Since it sailed across the sea, hunger and sickness driving the inhabitants mad.

He had been there, watching the same little boy standing in the square right now. On the overcrowded ship, somebody had stolen his belongings and his food. He had no comforting arms to surround him – his parents had been one of the thousands of people who had perished in the unforgiving war. He had been curled up on the cold, hard metal floor as rain poured onto the crush of bodies. Gloom had relished the fear that emanated out of him.

And then the ship had fallen – already taking the force of hundreds of bodies crushed on top of it, it had sunk, collapsing on its side. The boy had seen babies drown, mothers wail. Gloom was there, watching. Watching the boy face horrors that would make even the most heartless warlord shake.

## Hope by Aaron Ding

The authorities had saved some from a watery death, but led the refugees into an even worse fate in the punishing camp.

The boy is yelling now. “Apples, apples”.

No-one pays attention to him. Their eyes are all empty and dark with misery – survival is the only thing on their mind. Food is scarce in this wasteland. A wasteland of half-baked refugee tents lying in the blistering sun, of violence and screams.

Two soldiers drag a screaming girl through the dust. Her face is cut and bruised, legs dangling behind her. Onlookers watch, helpless. Her fate is one of the many prisons that surround the camp – places of misery and death. Gloom knows that the moment she steps inside the facility, she will most likely never see the light of day again.

Then, for the first time in years, Gloom feels pain as he stands next to the boy. The boy yells in anger.

Another pure emotion. Not fear, not gloom... But anger.

The soldiers yell out in surprise. Passers-by watch as the boy struggles with the two men. One of them pulls out his handgun and fires a bullet, heading somewhere into the crowd. Someone falters and falls onto the road. Taking her chance, the girl runs into the throng, escaping. But the boy has no chance.

The fight goes on – punches are thrown, yells echo in the air. But after years of hunger and starvation, the boy is weak. He is easily overpowered, taken down. It is now him who is tied with a rope, being dragged along the dusty road. He yields to the strong grip of the unrelenting men, heading towards the facility.

## Hope by Aaron Ding

Gloom watches. There's an unexplained urge to follow the boy. Even though this is regular in the unrelentless camp. Even though onlookers dismiss the violence as a normal occurrence.

He follows the boy.

It's just as he remembered it – dark. Desolate. Distraught. The front of the prison looms over the boy, a sinister face frowning down on the oppressed populace. The towering plaster walls house are marked with bullet holes and house disease-infected rats.

The boy is pushed into a damp, dirty cell. There is no window – just the company of rats and flies. A flimsy piece of cotton lies on the other side; somebody had tried unsuccessfully to make a decent bed to sleep on.

The boy starts crying. Tears flow down his cheek. Words are torn from him; words about a mother and father he didn't know; words about a life he was not blessed with. Words of unrelenting hopelessness. The tears drop on the floor and makes small puddles among the dust and sand.

For some unknown reason, Gloom feels an ache in his heart.

He runs out of the facility to escape the burning pain. Out into the night air and the scent of pollution and smoke from the acts of human civilization. But he feels a change in the air.

Something that he's never seen before.

The refugees walk around him, unnoticing. Still fearful, still hopeless. But now they have a purposeful stride in their wake. A slight lift of their chins. Gloom doesn't know why. But it pains him, an excruciating pain he's never felt before.

Someone walking along the street hands a bottle of clean-looking water to a beggar sitting on the side of the path. Suddenly a sharp burst of pain hits him. That bottle of water was a rare

## Hope by Aaron Ding

miracle in the camp. Why would someone do that? He staggers onto the dusty road in agony.

Gloom groans in pain.

And for the first time in years, the beggar smiles. It's a smile of a thousand memories depicting a family, a happy life that he had once before. Suddenly, the dusty, dirty path looks lighter. The lantern hanging on a tent flickers that little bit brighter.

A sharp pain hits Gloom's heart.

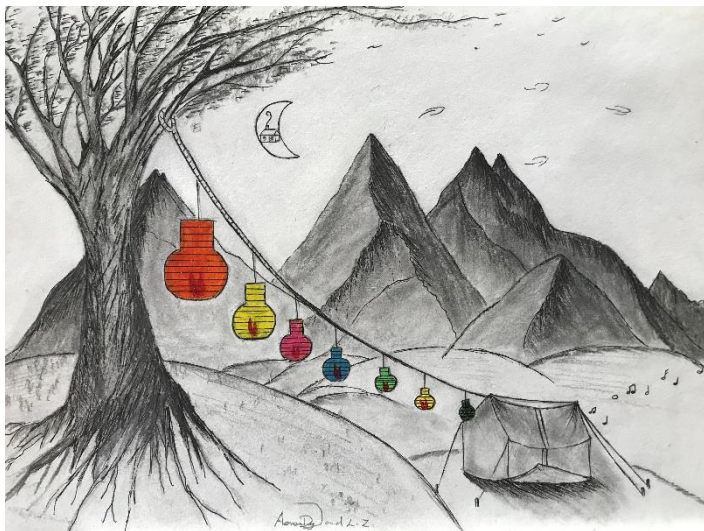
\* \* \*

Somehow, some way, the boy gains his freedom. Gloom watches, his breath heaving in and out in short rasping gasps as the boy walks out of the cell, dark rings under his eyes.

The boy's eyes adjust to the moonlight. The street is eerily empty – there is no-one there. The soldiers throw the boy onto the street, laughing. “Your disgusting friends aren't going to help you now, aren't they? They've all gone!” one of them cackles.

The road should be packed with people right now.

Except it's not.



The boy hobbles along the path. He sees tents empty, lanterns flickering off. They've abandoned him to the soldiers. Just like they always have. The feeling of despair swamps him, tears him apart. He sobs.

Until he hears the music.

## Hope by Aaron Ding

It's a folk song. One from his home country - a distinct little tune, playing along to the soft thrumming of a guitar. It was then when he realized there was light glimmering in the distance. And... was that singing?

Gloom walked with the boy through the mass of tents.

A barrel of oil was burning softly in the moonlight. Somebody had tied pieces of colored cloth together to create a string of glowing lanterns. The market square, where the boy had only days ago exchanged his fruit for bread, was lit up with dancing figures and a man strumming his guitar. People were smiling and chatting together around the square. The refugees' faces were weary, but lit up. Hopeful.

The boy emerges into the dance, an agonized Gloom following him. Eyes look towards him. Then cheering. Laughter. A sweet drink that one of the refugees had created, being a skillful wine maker in his home country.

The girl the boy had rescued offers him her hand. Then they are off dancing, twirling in the moonlight.

Fear, despair. It's all gone. Replaced with this... This...

Suddenly, Gloom's heart cracks open. He yells in agony. Something's ripping his chest open and putting it back together again. He ducks into a nearby alleyway, unseen by the people dancing in the square.

A new light emanates from him. His cloak disappears, his face is unmasked.

He gasps.

\* \* \*

## **Hope by Aaron Ding**

The sound of music and chatter drift through the air. The figure strides through the throng, watching people laughing, smiling. Joking.

Hope dances where there is light and darkness, fear but joy.

That is exactly where he is – among refugees who have regained families in this small community. Who have had their lives taken away from them, but regained. Hope takes lives away and rebuilds them; Hope brightens the darkest alleyways. There has always been Hope, but it's just been waiting to show itself.

A boy stands in the middle of the throng, dark rings under his eyes. He holds a bag of the best fruit he could find, boldly shouting “Apples, apples”.

Hope smiles.

It's a new beginning.