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“One, two, three,” I said to the bark in front of me. I began to think about how life had been since we moved away from the city; how it was lucky that Dad found work in a locality that provided us presents of grassy meadows and rolling crests that were rife with beauty every single day. Galax, Virginia was our new home, and we embraced it with open arms.

“Four, five, six, seven,” I said to the vine that climbed the bark in front of my nose as I continued to count. I began to think about where Sarah might have been hiding. Sarah, my younger sister, was my seemingly perpetual playmate.

On a spring morning in 1992, the plants weren’t the only things coming into being, Sarah was as well. Born weighing four pounds and two ounces, Sarah was just a pound lighter than I was when I was born four years before her. My sister was always a quiet girl; the lips of her small mouth folded inward and formed into a small smile at all times. Her blonde hair was always short enough so that her powder blue eyes and spherical dimples were always on full display.

Never one to endeavor for the heed or attention that children most often live for, Sarah kept to herself. As I saw it, she only drew from the warm, tender well of benevolence that she kept inside of her to create the beautiful things that she created.

On the day prior to the day that I began my count, Sarah led me out among the crisp Virginia breeze to show me a masterpiece. At the bottom of the driveway that winded up the hillside to our new home, my eyes began to focus on the garden of color that sprang up from the asphalt. There, at my feet, I saw a short, pink stick figure, drawn in chalk, with yellow hair. This figure was holding hands with another image: a tall, blue stick figure with brown hair. Under the pink figure, a name was written in chalk: Sarah. Under the blue figure, another name was written: Dylan. While all of the members of my family typically addressed me as “Dyl”, Sarah was the only one that addressed me as “Dylan.” She always said that “Dylan” was prettier, driving in her point with a smile that was accompanied by her blue eyes, which conveyed her brutal honesty. She sat down next to the driveway mural. “Do you like it?” Sarah asked. I responded to her by saying, “love it.” I crouched down next to her and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

I snapped out of this daydream when I realized that I had lost count. “Eight, nine, ten. Ready or not, here I come!” I quickly called out before I began my search in the late afternoon sun. I was twelve years old on this particular day. I found Sarah nestled in a mound of leaves that had fallen from the trees across the street earlier that week. Upon discovering her, the instructions that my mother gave me began to resound through my head. “Make sure you and your sister come in before dark,” my mother said. Suddenly, I heard another voice. “Can we play another game?” Sarah asked politely. “Alright, but just one more,” I said to her while taking note of the orange sky meeting the orange horizon in the distance.

As a way to accept and embrace our new life in the country, my sister and I would often play a game that involved us pretending to be one of the many animals found in the surrounding mountains. We would pretend to be owls by having wide-eyed staring contest and seeing which one of us could produce the loudest “Hooo” without throwing our voices out. We would pretend to be rabbits by hopping around the front yard, resting our backs on the backs of our legs in between hops. Sarah’s voice suddenly infiltrated my ears once again. “Can we be cardinals again?” she asked. She was referring to the game that we modeled after the beautiful red and black birds that we would occasionally see amongst the summer’s enveloping haze of dust and pollen. I nodded to her and we began our descent down to the maple tree.

The maple was the only tree on our property. Located at the bottom of our sloped backyard, it was the perfect height for me and Sarah to climb. We would climb the tree, mount ourselves on its second-lowest limb, unfurl our arms proudly out to our sides, and leap off the side of the limb to the ground below, soaking up the sound and feeling of the swift, surging air as we fell, a feeling that simulated the feeling of flying to a satisfactory extent. When our soles met the ground, we always called out, “The cardinal has landed!” We called the game “being cardinals.”

On the second-lowest limb, Sarah and I sat for a moment, allowing our eyes to inscribe the sight of the setting sun on the insides of our minds, tucking the image away for the dreams we would have later that night. Out of nowhere, I said to Sarah, “We should climb higher.” Sarah quietly responded by shaking her head. Without Sarah, I began to ascend further up the tree, my hands occasionally becoming glued to the curvature of the bark due to the brown, sticky sap that seeped from its pores. I reached the tree’s fourth-lowest limb and perched myself on top of it: one leg on either side as if I were riding a horse. Eventually, Sarah quietly followed. When she reached the limb, she sat on it as if it were a park bench. Both of her legs dangled off of the edge in front of her.
As the sky began its final fold into the distant horizon, a stiff breeze was released. The breeze detached many of the hissing leaves from the canopy that surrounded me and Sarah. I began to joggle the limb that we were perched on in hopes of releasing more leaves into the wind. “Come on, help me!” I yelled to Sarah. I increased the force of my shaking. “Sarah, come on, help me!” I yelled again. I began to shake the limb even harder. Visions began to manifest in my mind: pictures of a downpour of orange leaves with me and Sarah leaping out into it. What made me awaken from my vision was the weight of the limb suddenly shifting. The limb became significantly lighter. The limb, all of the sudden, was much easier to shake. The last thing that I saw in my visions of falling leaves was Sarah and me falling amongst the downpour. The last thing that I saw in the light of that day, just before the sun vanished behind the horizon, was a large rock on the ground beneath the tree. One ray of sunlight revealed fresh drops of blood spread across the rock’s surface. Another ray of light, the last of that day, illuminated Sarah’s small blonde head lying in the grass next to the rock.

I sat on the second-lowest limb of the tree in a black suit, clutching a piece of paper that had a picture of Sarah on the front. The picture did not effectively capture the beauty of her powder blue eyes. She was smiling in the picture; her usual folded-in lips formed the smile that I was always used to seeing. My sister was always a quiet girl, so as I sat on the limb, I allowed myself time to think about what I had done; time to ask myself why I had always absorbed my surroundings using my nose and ears and not my eyes. I threw the piece of paper in frustration. It glided down, showcasing a snippet of what it had written on it as it settled on the ground below: “1992-2000.”

Today, an older lady answers the door. “Yes?” she asks, questioning why I had just rung her doorbell. “My name is Dylan Anderson,” I say to her, “I lived in this house when I was a kid.” The woman showers me with a suspicious look. I explain to her that I want to get one last look at the maple tree in the backyard before I leave town. She allows me to look, but asks that I stay outside of the house for the duration of my visit. As I approach the maple tree, I notice that its second-lowest limb, a limb that I had to climb to reach the last time that I saw it, is now level with the top of my head. I reach up and grasp it. I close my eyes and let the sticky sap seep onto my hand, through my fingers, and over my wedding ring. I look up to the sky. “Alright, Sarah,” I say, “Where are you? I know that you are listening. Please show me that you are.” I allow my gaze to collect the details of the still afternoon sky above me. “The cardinal has landed,” I say in a whisper. I hear no response. I lay my hand on the tree one last time then turn and begin walking up the hill. Suddenly, a heavy breeze begins to cascade down through the hill’s spears of grass and eventually into the canopy of the maple. I didn’t think much about it at first, but then I paused. A stiff breeze? Today has been a still summer day thus far. Before I could dive deeper into this thought, I hear a loud chirp echoing from the tree behind me. I turn to look at the tree: its yellow-green leaves, its hazelnut-colored trunk, and also, a new color that I had not seen a moment ago: red. Chirps were resonating from this color. Tears begin to fill my eyes. A stiff breeze. A cardinal. Sarah is still creating beautiful things. “You like it?” is what I imagine she is saying from the clouds above. I look up to the sky and say, “I love it.”

are in the car.” As we pulled away from the Galax house for the last time, I caught a glimpse of what I had just drawn on the surface of the driveway: a blue stick figure labeled “Dylan.” The stick figure’s arms reached out to the space next to it, but touched nothing. Nothing was there. Nothing would ever be there. Tears filled my eyes as the car accelerated.

I sat in our driveway before I got up and climbed the path to the side of the house. Using water from the water spigot protruding from the brick, I washed blue chalk dust off of my hands. While my parents usually addressed me as “Dyl,” on that day they addressed me as “Dylan.” “Dylan, make sure you got everything,” they said, “make sure all of the boxes
It started out as every other normal, boring work day. People bustling to meet deadlines, others not caring if they showed up or submitted a project. I was in my usual mundane and indifferent mood. I had been employed with the Fresh Media Animation Corporation for more than six months, and my supervisor had never even addressed me by name. It was always, “new girl, fetch me some coffee” or “intern, could you ask Veronica to sort through and delegate these storyboards.” I wasn’t even an intern. I had been hand-chosen from a list of worthy applicants because of my talent and superior portfolio. Did my co-workers realize that this job was my dream career? I was walked on by everyone within my dream company, even the janitor; he refused to change my wastebasket or to even offer to sweep my cubicle. When I first began this job I had such high expectations and was eager to prove myself in the digital media industry. However, since my first week of employment, I hid my open excitement and traded my determination in for a dirty cubicle and became a nameless glorified secretary. I hadn’t received a single project or even been offered a chance to evaluate a single sketch. I decided to keep my head down and let this behavior continue. After all, who am I to question my colleagues? They seem to have it all figured out. I’m just a pebble in the shoe of their success, annoying and useless.

The next day had begun just as the previous two-hundred had, quiet and discouraging. I had already made several coffee runs and taken out my co-worker, Veronica’s trash. Then my supervisor informed me that I finally had an assignment. I had to stay late and redesign every backdrop to match the new animations he had selected for our newest project. This not only wasn’t in my skillset but would take several wearisome, monotonous hours. He informed me of my new assignment as the workday came to an end. It was already well past seven o’clock, and the office had become a vacant wasteland with only me as an occupant. I cursed under my breath and began to daydream halfway through my workload.

Without any kind of warning, I was jerked back to reality when I realized that my pencil began sketching of its own accord. Confused, I began to look around as if to find a solution to this bizarre scene I was witnessing. To no avail, I stared at the pencil as it glided across my drawing board with vigorous intent. After several moments and strides lapsed I was released from my state of shock and let out a squeaky laugh. Then without hesitation, I spoke to the once inanimate object. “H-hh-hello?” I began addressing the wooden entity, “how are you doing that?” I continued to question. Without expecting an answer, the pencil found a vacant piece of paper and began scribbling out what I deduced to be an answer to my previously stated inquiries. The pencil informed me that he, she, or whatever sexual orientation a pencil identified with, had grown weary of my disposition and current place within my company. It continued to explain my value and worth and informed me that it intended to make these traits known to my employer and fellow artists. I was shocked, and for the first time, my eagerness began to reappear. The pencil and I conceived a plan to redo all of the storyboards as well as incorporate my personal flare into the otherwise common characters that had been designed for the project.

Hours after hours passed, each of us sketching, the pencil continued to whittle away as it drew. Every so often it would begin to grow dull and then, what seemed like a painless task, allowed me to sharpen it. The pencil had been worn down to merely a nub and an eraser, the clock now read 5:00 am. With the last stroke of my pencil, my newly acquired friend began scribbling out its last demands. I realized the lead was almost gone and that my savior in all its mahogany glory would soon be gone. Over the past few hours, I had grown attached to my thriving, yellow friend. I realized that it had given me the courage and strength to prove myself all while sacrificing itself. Tears began to fall on the page as I began to read its final plea. “You belong here and offer a great amount of talent to this corporation. You lost yourself somewhere along the way and needed a single ounce of encouragement. You are worthy of the title: Executive Animator. Your name deserves to be known. Never give up and always create from the heart. It was your passion that gave me life, so with that life, I helped you prove myself all while sacrificing itself. Never forget this word….”

The lead had broken. The pencil that had once radiated so much life was now a broken reminder of strength and an unspoken promise.

Without notice, I began to slowly open my eyes. I looked at the clock with confusion plastered on my face. The hands on the clock read that only thirty minutes had passed. It was just now almost 8:00 pm. Had I really imagined or dreamed up the entire night? I looked down to see that the storyboards were the same as they were when I first began working on them. I sat there confused and stuck in an internal struggle. I looked down at my new, perfectly sharpened pencil. I remembered what the pencil had written, “you belong here…. It was your passion that gave
me life.” I decided to replay the words over and over in my head as I began to recreate the story and characters.

Eventually, I had redesigned the entire project. I worked all night on the project, and when the secretary and other workers began to show up I went to my supervisor’s office. He displayed little concern about my appearance or current proud state. I handed him the work and proceeded to wait. Within no time he looked at me and began to discipline my actions. He began by saying that, “this was not the task I assigned you Mrs.-”. He paused for a moment while evaluating the changes I had contributed. “Exactly what is your name?” he questioned. After an overdue brief introduction, he smiled. Before I realized it everyone addressed me by my given name and work began to pile up on my desk. Even the janitor began offering to attend to my mess. I had finally received the recognition I deserved within the company. Faintly, I heard the sound of my worn, stub of a pencil roll across my desk and fall into the recently emptied wastebasket. I reached down without hesitation and retrieved my friend from the dark fate of the cool plastic bag. With a tear trickling down my face and a twinge in my heart, I grabbed a piece of tape. I proceeded to tape what was left of the pencil to the inside cover of my portfolio. I was uncertain if the events I imagined were real, but I would always treasure the worth I gained from one tiny piece of lead and coarse shell of wood that was worth more to me than gold.
There was a large thud followed by harsh shaking. It was pitch black, and I was trying to figure out why.

“Sir. Sir, you need to fasten your seatbelt. Sir.”

I opened my eyes and realized that I was in a deep, deep sleep. I guess those sleeping pills were doing their job. I had gotten up about two hours into the flight to use the bathroom and take a sleeping pill.

“Sir, you need to fasten your seatbelt.”

I looked up in my drowsy state to see a flight attendant holding on to the storage bin above me.

“Sir, please fasten your seatbelt,” she stated. “We’ve traveled into a storm, and the captain has said that there could be some unexpected turbulence.”

I reached down to find my belt, but I was sitting on it. It was a struggle, but I finally got both ends of my belt and attached them. I then looked back up at the flight attendant, and she didn’t seem pleased, but she braced herself onto the next row. The plane shook terribly again. I gripped my hand rest and closed my eyes, hoping that I might be able to fall back asleep, but it was hopeless. The plane was shaking too much for me to even attempt to sleep, so I gritted my teeth and tried to just relax.

“You don’t like flying either do you?” The older man beside me said.

I looked over at him and replied, “I don’t mind the flying, but I’ve never been in any turbulence that has been this bad.”

The man reached into his jacket pocket and handed me an airplane bottle of Jack Daniels. “Here, this will take the edge off.” He said.

I took the bottle from his hand and thanked him. I cracked the top and tried to wait for the plane to stop shaking enough for me to drink it. I waited about fifteen seconds, but it never let up at all, so I decided to drink it anyway. Right as I swallowed, the plane dropped. I grabbed as hard as I could onto the hand rest, and looked up. The flight attendant was stuck to the top of the ceiling. Suddenly, the plane shot back up, and the lady hit the floor hard and didn’t move. The plane then shot straight down again sending her limp body back to the top of the cabin. This time the breathing masks fell from the storage above, and a voice came on the intercom yelling, “Put your masks on, and put your heads down!”

I struggled to get ahold of my mask, and finally grabbed it and put the elastic around my head. I then looked over at the man next to me, and he already had his on. I tucked my head into my lap and closed my eyes. The plane dropped down and shook from side to side. The shaking was so bad that the bins above our heads exploded open, hurling suitcases and backpacks all over the isle. A suitcase hit me in the back of the head and burst open, throwing clothes all over me and the man in the seat beside me.

Finally, the plane stopped diving and climbing, and the shaking stopped almost instantly. I looked up and removed the shirts and pants that covered my body. Glancing over the cabin, I was shocked by the amount of suitcases that were everywhere. There were so many that I couldn’t even see the flight attendant that was lying limp in the walkway. I looked out the window and saw dark, gray skies and rain. The plane suddenly shot down harder than it had ever done before, and the sound of metal tearing apart made me cover my ears. Suddenly, a huge gust of wind hit my whole body, and I looked to my right to see a crack in the wall starting to tear the plane apart. It started right beside the man next to me.

Everything began to move in slow motion. I followed the crack as it went directly over my head and to the other side, and then finally right under my feet leaving them dangling. I knew exactly what was about to occur, but I had never thought anything like that would happen to me. The crack started to get wider and wider, and then the plane split in half. I looked straight at the man beside me, and we locked eyes. Suddenly, he disappeared, being torn from the plane. The wind was so strong it pulled the mask from my face. For some reason my seat was still attached to the floor. I tried to look behind me, but the wind and rain were forcing my whole body down. I glanced up and there was only the gray sky. The whole front of the plane had been torn completely away and must have been falling just like we had. The plane was spinning so fast it felt like I could be thrown from my seat into the open air. I looked to my right to see the wind and rain. I glanced up and there was only the gray sky. The whole front of the plane had been torn completely away and must have been falling just like we had. The plane was spinning so fast it felt like I could be thrown from my seat into the open air. I looked to my right to see the ground coming closer. The screams from the other passengers were barely audible against the sounds of the brutal winds and rain. The ground was so close now that I could see cars driving on an interstate. Then time slowed down, and I could feel my heart beating slowly. I closed my eyes and waited for our plane to finally meet the unstoppable ground. I waited with my hands still grasping the hand rest firmly. Then everything was completely black.

“Sir, sir you need to fasten your seatbelt. Sir.”

I open my eyes to see the same flight attendant peering down at me.

“Sir, you need to fasten your seatbelt.”
Homeless stars go forth  
Barter with your dust and shine  
Novas kneel kindly  
Comets call coolly careful  
Oh, how astronomical

Yodel on an eve  
Instrument’s skin, scholars’ souls  
Break even, bass drum bold.  
Pile vile in tune travesties  
Sing together to mend minds.

Noire car pool hype  
Fine dining in driver’s seat  
Salt on the dial  
Stationary wagon wheel  
Pass me my fries as I cry

You cannot love me  
No, I cannot lose you, too,  
Like former friends fled  
Grown to be lovers, then dead  
To each other, to unknown.

Friends it is then freak  
I liked you for your kindness  
Not to see you weep  
You are weak, dear big brother  
Let it stay that way for pete’s.
Cars

Her car is a 2001 Kia Sedona.
Her friends call it a “sketchy mom van.”
It’s supposed to be white.
Except it’s not
Dirt smudges, grass, and scratches decorate the outside interior,
Along with a giant ass dent in the side,
A missing handle,
And a muffler that rattles when you drive.
Her body is a 1999 Caucasian Female.
Her friends call her a “bossy whore,”
But only when she isn’t around to hear.
Supposed to be purely white,
Untouched,
Except she’s not.
Stretch marks, freckles, and cellulite decorate her outside interior,
Along with fingerprints that don’t belong to her,
Self-inflicted scars,
And tired eyes.
When you drive the car, the rattling can easily be drowned out
by turning up the music really
loud—
Much like herself
When her words are actually covering up the fact that
Her heart beats twice as fast as the average person
And every time someone reaches out to touch her
She slams on the brakes
Preventing herself from crashing again
Because she can only find solace in things that last for a moment,
Such as ice sculptures or sand castles,
Or believing one tank of gas will last a lifetime.
Because when the most she ever knew
Was the least anyone would give,
Running on fumes became normal.
A dead battery was never a surprise.
Birds beyond buildings,
But the buildings stretch so far.
In the city, man builds the horizon.
He builds the sun, the moon, and the stars.
The chirping of people,
but no nests to be found;
No settling down and no cessation.
Masses lurk in the shadows of brick;
steadfast among the asphalt’s intoxicating roar,
But,

So distinct are the few that hum;
Not impaired, not deaf are these few
Not at all.
These few go within themselves to listen.
A girl among these few;
The mahogany fibers circling her shoulders swept
by the current set forth from passing cars;
Fibers going with the current,
But the rest of her motionless;
Planks of lumber permit her to hover.
White strings drift from her ears and connect to a screen;
The screen remaining stable
as her gaze receives its glow;
Locked.

Much connection within the girl’s nest.
No connection between the nest and the outside world
with its unrelenting roar.
The girl cannot see the man I am seeing;
Long;
Thin;
Eyes behind glasses;
Throat behind tie;
His body behind the wheel of a car
as it awaits the green glow;
His entire life
being lived behind buildings.
The girl cannot smell what I am smelling;
Aromas from the tails of fast-moving machines;
Stenches from below the broken earth;
The smell of water, but water that has been tainted by man.
The girl perhaps knows that there is nature beyond this city;
There can be soft hums in this forest of pangling chirps;
There can be birds beyond these buildings,
But these buildings stretch so far.
In the city, man builds the horizon.
He builds the sun,
the moon,
and the stars.
Something Blue

Makayla Adams
First Place, Non-fiction

The dog days of August were beating down on us. The sun hung high in the sky over the venue, but it felt as if it were only one hundred yards away. Chatty old ladies in cheap lipstick swore up and down that they were melting. Napkins were being dabbed on foreheads to remove thin veils of sweat from temples and necks. Men in suits pulled at their collars and ladies in beautiful dresses fanned themselves with their invitations. I was grateful we arrived early to the venue and found a shaded spot. I moved to the edge of the flimsy wooden chair I was sitting on and searched for the officiant. He was nowhere to be found.

I couldn’t wait for the ceremony to be over. I was daydreaming of an air-conditioned reception hall and glasses of bubbly champagne. I glanced over at my fiancé who was chit-chatting with a longtime friend of ours and completely ignoring my presence. I wished I had let my sister tag along instead. At least then I would have had some company...or at the very least, some conversation. I rolled my eyes. Shifting back around in my chair, I continued to survey the scene. Tall pine trees surrounded the tiny gazebo that my friends were to be married in. The fertile grass looked beautiful. I slipped off my sandals and brushed my bare feet across it. The scent of the pine leaves was pungent. I noticed light sniffles coming from the back of the crowd and tilted my head, wondering who it was. The gazebo was adorned with white lace, burlap and peonies. Fresh red petals were sprinkled along the aisle. Large black lanterns hung at the beginning of each aisle. I counted ten. I glanced back to the gazebo and the light pink bulbs of the peonies reminded me how delicate this all was.

Acquaintances began engaging in polite conversation and I began to admire the soft smiles that passed me by. From behind my large, smudged sunglasses, I noticed the delicate interactions that were happening all around me. I admired how everyone dressed in their Sunday best. It was a proper wedding, a beautifully romantic scene. You could see the joy beaming off everyone. I felt slightly uncomfortable, though. I became very aware of my expressionless face and immediately put on a polite smile, nodding and greeting anyone in my line of vision.

The officiant was a small, bearded man. He was bald, which made his massive black beard look odd in comparison. He seemed like the type of guy who would wear Chacos and enjoy leisurely hikes on his off days. I imagined him to be the cool youth pastor who drank an imported beer every now and again. I wasn’t sure what to make of him, so I decided to ask my fiancé what he thought. I shifted my body, and the flimsy chair I preoccupied made an awful sound. "Damn chair," I mumbled. My legs seemed to peel off the hot chair like paint, and I vowed to have proper seating on our big day. I poked my fiancé on the shoulder to get his attention. Still deep in conversation, I was ignored. Finally, I got a word in. Unfortunately, though, he was unamused by my interpretation of the tiny bearded officiant. He offered a half-arsed chuckle and then carried on with his conversation. Annoyed, I swung back around my chair and wished I didn’t have to be so polite. I often felt this way, so I sat smug in my chair, leaning into the cheap white plastic. I began to sulk and became increasingly annoyed as the minutes dragged on. Today wasn’t the day for this nonsense, I thought. I then promised myself I would shake it off. Well, at least try to shake it off.

Suddenly, soft music began to play. I turned around to see my friend Kaitlyn standing at the top of the aisle. In that moment, I forgot about the heat and all my annoyances. This was why I was here. She took my breath away. Her fiery red hair was dancing in the summer breeze and her lace gown followed her with each step she took. Holding her father’s arm for dear life, I could see that her hands were shaking as he tried to steady her. I wondered how anyone could be that beautiful and anxious at the same time. The sea of people then stood as she walked down the aisle, eyes locked on her soon-to-be husband. Slowly, she made her way to him and he wiped a tear off her rosy cheek. He then mouthed the words, "I love you." You would have never known there was a crowd of one hundred people there; they seemed to only see each other on this special day. "We’re next," a soft voice broke through my thoughts and brought me back to reality. I felt my fiancé’s arm wrap around my shoulder. His eyes looked gold as the sun reflected off them. He smiled and squeezed my shoulder. Still aggravated, I immediately averted them back to the couple that was so happy and in love. “Yeah,” I replied fighting back tears. “We sure are.”

The reception was full of laughter and happy tears. I dragged my fiancé to the dance floor where we were bombarded with middle aged folk doing the electric slide. I loved to dance. Him...not so much. He quickly became tired of the festivities and decided it was time for him to return to our table. Reluctantly, I left the floor, too. We found ourselves sitting with old friends we hadn’t seen in years, friends that were excited and curious about our big
day. Wedding talk couldn’t be avoided, so I put on a smile and hoped the champagne would make it all a little easier. I took a deep breath when I saw whose place-card was next to mine. The card read, “Trisha Swanson.” Oh lord. Ms. Trisha - or Ms. Trish, as I called her - was my Sunday school teacher all the way through eighth grade. She was a family friend and a notorious chatterbox. I then caught a glimpse of her from across the room; her spikey, bright red hair rose like dancing flames on her head and compensated for her tiny stature. Her glasses always seemed to be falling off her nose. When she had them on, though, her eyes became three times their normal size and her piercing gaze became more intense. Ms. Trish also had a way of working her Yorkie, Sammy, into every conversation. I always admired how she spoke her mind. Some people argued that she was crazy, but I knew better. She was lonely.

Ms. Trish caught a glimpse of us at the table and began flailing her arms. She then proceeded to let out several high-pitched squeals. “Well, I’ll be!” She danced her way over to me and laid a wet kiss on my cheek, just missing my mouth. “Let me see that ring, girl!” She scooped my left hand from the table and held it inches from her face. Ms. Trish hadn’t seen me since I became engaged. “Oh, what a beautiful ring!” she began to swoon. “Thank you. It was my grandmother’s.” I offered up a smile. She seemed very pleased by this. “Good thing, too. Saved me from having to buy one!” my fiancé joked. I didn’t find it funny. Ms. Trish did, though, right along with everyone else at our table. I had to pretend to laugh, too. She began to ask all about our big day. The card read, “Trisha Swanson.” Oh lord. Ms. Trish seemed to be working up to something, every grand gesture and every special occasion we had ever had. Nothing was coming to mind. I tried thinking about our younger years and when we first met. We were young and naïve. I was only sixteen and had never had a boyfriend. Logan was eighteen and was a smooth-talker. Nope. Nothing there. I panicked. I chuckled, nervously. I began to think about the moment when I knew I was in love. We had been together for almost five years, but I never really thought about it. I thought back to the moment, every grand gesture and every special occasion we had ever had. Nothing was coming to mind. I tried thinking about our younger years and when we first met. We were young and naïve. I was only sixteen and had never had a boyfriend. Logan was eighteen and was a smooth-talker. Nope. Nothing there. I panicked. Suddenly, I was staring down the barrel of a loaded gun. I had taken far too long and everyone at the table was now expecting an answer. I had nothing for them, though. I had to say something. Anything. I threw out a nervous laugh. “Wow. We’ve been together so long - I can’t remember, to be honest with you. It was sometime in the last five years.” The table laughed. My fiancé didn’t, though. His smile fell from his face and his eyes averted to his lap. He knew what I was refusing to face. I continued to rack my brain. I sat for what felt like hours and thought hard. I distanced myself from the conversations around me and began to come to a tragic realization. How could this be happening right now? My breathing became shallow, and I sighed. What felt like envy coursed through my veins and I immediately sat up straight in my chair. Something seemed to drop in the pit of my stomach. “What the hell?” I mumbled to myself. I searched for a conversation to jump into to distract myself. Ms. Trish seemed to be working up about something when I glanced at her, and I decided to inquire as to what it was about. This had to be interesting.

“What’s going on over here?” I nudged my fiancé who looked like he just done a good deed. A smug smile sat on his face, and I immediately knew he was behind this. I almost wished I wouldn’t have putted in. “Oh, honey, Logan over here was just telling me about the moment he knew he was in love with you. He said it was the first time he lay eyes on you! Now, isn’t that just so precious?” Ms. Trish reached for my hand and squeezed it tightly. Her eyes seemed to be welling up with tears. God, she was so dramatic. I turned to my fiancé and smiled. That really was sweet. I kissed his cheek. His fresh beard poked my lips. “Nice.” I teased. I turned back to Ms. Trish, her hands still on mine. I wished she would let go. I was finished with this conversation, but I knew she was going to drag it on. I was growing more and more tired. It had been a long day.

“Smile, Makayla, just smile,” I had to keep reminding myself. “So, I have to ask.” She seemed so eager. “When did you fall in love with this handsome fella?” She winked. I mumbled to myself. I searched for a conversation to jump into to distract myself. Ms. Trish seemed to be worked up about something when I glanced at her, and I decided to inquire as to what it was about. This had to be interesting.
suddenly I was in a room with one hundred people, and all eyes were on me. At least, that’s what it felt like. My hands began to tremble, and I had to swallow the lump in the back of my throat. I realized that I had never really fallen in love with the man I promised to marry. We both knew it.

I quickly excused myself from the crowded table and calmly made my way to the bathroom. I locked myself in the large bathroom stall. The bathroom was cold and smelled like lavender with a hint of bleach. The tears began to fall, and I couldn’t convince them to stop. How could this be true? Surely in all the time we had been together I would’ve realized this by now. “You’re being ridiculous,” I said out loud. My voice cracked and echoed against the walls of the empty bathroom. I tried convincing myself that I was overreacting. This was nonsense. I promised this man I would love him for the rest of my life. That was not something I took lightly. I knew the promise. I knew the commitment. I was ready to take this next step. It was about time. I looked up at the tile ceiling and began counting the tiles. I finished counting and closed my eyes. I thought that might stop the tears from falling. Nothing helped, so I just let them come. Finally, I came to the realization that if I was truly in love, I would know it. How could you not? I grew up dreaming about the day I fell in love. I dreamed about the man I would marry. I wished for the day I had someone to love. Now that I had that, those feelings never seemed to hold up. I wasn’t rejoicing in love. I was chained and bound to it. I slumped against the cold bathroom stall and tried to pull myself together. My hands fell into my lap and my last tear rolled down my cheek. I couldn’t feel anything. I became numb to it all. I looked at the sparkling ring on my finger and felt like all the air had been sucked out of my lungs. My heart had never ached like this before.

Staring between the cracks of the stall, I finally came to the realization of what was really happening. I took a breath that came from the deepest, emptiest place in me. “I am making a huge mistake.”
As above, so below
Medium: color pencil and pastel on black pastel paper

Brad Simon
First Place, Visual Arts
Off With Her Head
Medium: mixed media on Bristol board

Emily Overbey
Second Place, Visual Arts
Earning My Collaging Patch

Medium: collage on canvas

Haley King
Third Place, Visual Arts
Freedom
Medium: India ink on drawing paper

Runzhou Zhu
Honorable Mention, Visual Arts
A Starry Night
Medium: acrylic on canvas

Samantha Koniak
Honorable Mention, Visual Arts
Lucerne Swans

Medium: photograph

Jose Tavarez
Judges' Distinction, Visual Arts
Robin's Nest
Medium: collage on illustration board

Taylore Bivens
Judges' Distinction, Visual Arts
Tessellation

Medium: ink and color pencil on Bristol board

David Gonzalez
Judges' Distinction, Visual Arts
**Kaleidoscope**

Medium: mixed media on Bristol board

Shayna Richardson
Judges’ Distinction, Visual Arts
Goya
Medium: graphite on drawing paper

Jenna Jacobs
Judges’ Distinction, Visual Arts
Midnight Magic
Medium: mixed media

Cassandra Parker
Judges' Distinction, Visual Arts
Dead Lights
Medium: ink on Bristol Board

Brad Simon
Judges' Distinction, Visual Arts
I boarded a plane for Haiti early in the morning, before the chickens were up. I was running away. I wore ratty jeans and an old faded t-shirt. I didn't have makeup on, and for once I didn't care about my appearance. My first flight was from Tri-Cities to Atlanta, and it wasn't anything special. I found my seat and prepared myself for the journey ahead. In that moment I was determined to leave my life behind. I ached for something new, and I wanted to erase my past.

Once at the Atlanta airport, I found my gate and waited. I watched the people in scalding hot water, and noticed a monster-sized zit on my chin, along with a long, shiny, grey hair protruding from the top of my head. I could not believe my eyes! I had never felt so ugly and disgusting in my life. So much for not caring about my appearance, but in that moment it felt as if my body was stuck between a teenage girl and an old lady. I didn't want to be either. A middle aged, well dressed woman washed her hands beside me and complained about something that seemed minuscule to me. "It could be worse; you could be 29 with grey hair and acne," I snapped at her, then laughed halfheartedly trying to make a joke about my current situation. I didn't wait around for her response. I still felt gross as I exited the ladies room. It was no wonder my boyfriend couldn't be faithful to me.

I had some time to kill before my next flight, and I was hungry. I was good at feeding my pain. I found myself in a TGI Fridays at 9am with the biggest cheeseburger I had ever seen. It was loaded with all the fixings and it oozed cheese down the sides. I couldn't wait to sink my teeth into it. As the plane took off, I closed my eyes and visions of deception and infidelity played like a movie in my head. My heart was in thousands of pieces, like a mirror shattered on the floor. I opened my eyes to keep from bursting into tears, and that's when I introduced myself to the child. To my surprise, she spoke perfect English. In a few short minutes, I learned her name, Bruelle, that she was seven years old and that's when I introduced myself to the child. To my surprise, she spoke perfect English. In a few short minutes, I learned her name, Bruelle, that she was seven years old and lived in Georgia, but was traveling to Haiti to visit family. Bruelle and I chatted throughout the four-hour flight. Meanwhile, the older lady beside the window continued to smile. We shared candy, played games, and sometime in the middle of the flight, Bruelle fell asleep with her head on my shoulder. We were no longer strangers.

We started to get closer to Port-au-Prince and the flight attendants began passing out customs forms. I took mine out with the basic information required, but the old lady just sat there holding hers, still smiling. Suddenly, she was saying something else in French and looking directly at me. She repeated it many times, as I stared back at her blankly. Eventually, I heard a small, familiar voice tell me, "She's asking for your help." I proceeded to ask the old lady for her ID, by showing her mine and pointing a lot. My young translator had picked the worst time to need a bathroom break. However, the old lady handed over her ID and customs form, and I copied personal information, such
as name, address, and birthday from one to the other. I did as much as I could from Bernadette's ID, and then I stopped a flight attendant, who spoke French, to finish the form. Bernadette once again smiled at me, this time to show her appreciation.

The plane landed shortly thereafter. Slowly, passengers began to exit, and I followed suit. When I reached the door, the sun’s light was blinding and the heat took my breath. Beads of sweat dripped from my forehead as I entered the airport in Port-au-Prince. Guards with machine guns greeted us at the door. We were herded like cattle into the customs maze. I could hear several different languages being spoken all at once, which added greatly to my confusion. I asked one of those mission trip people for assistance. He rattled off some instructions and went on his way. Luckily, I figured out what I was supposed to be doing by watching some others nearby. By the time I was finished with the customs process, I had lost sight of Bernadette and Brueelle. I didn’t get to say goodbye, but I knew I would always remember the child that made me forget what I was running from and the old lady’s genuine smile.

I continued through the airport pulling my big red and white polka dot suitcase behind me. The last hallway before the exit door was filled with taxi drivers, none of which was shy. Each of them called out to the travelers in broken English, trying to drum up business. I kept my head down and my luggage close. I stopped, peering out the window in search of my shuttle to the hotel. It was impossible to see anything in the sea of people that occupied the area just beyond the doors. I knew that once I stepped through the exit, there was no going back inside. I felt my heart start to beat faster and faster; panic was setting in. I backed away from the window and searched frantically for my phone. As luck would have it, when I found it, I didn’t have service. I turned to a taxi driver nearby and began trying to explain my situation. He offered to drive the short distance to the hotel for only sixty dollars. I respectfully declined his offer, we were not. After he gathered his composure, he began to shout at me in Creole. My taxi driver came to my rescue once again, and the man left reluctantly. The driver opened the passenger side door and instructed me to get in the front seat. I did as I was told. It wasn’t until we had already left the parking area that I realized I was alone, in a taxi, with a stranger, on my way to a place I’d never been. So far this man had been kind, but fear was setting in anyway. After all, how would I know if he was going in the right direction to the hotel? I did the only thing I could do: I prayed.

Traffic was bumper to bumper, and if there were any traffic laws, no one paid any mind to them. Motorcycles whizzed in and out from behind larger vehicles. People walked into traffic as if they owned the road, causing cars to slam on their brakes. Intersections were a free-for-all, with no stop signs or traffic lights, the sound of beeping horns filling the air. The van I was in found every pot hole along the road. The sun pounded on my skin, and the heat took my breath. I nervously looked out my window for any sign of my hotel. Instead, I noticed a skinny, brown dog wandering through the streets. Every time we made a turn, the dog was there again. A lump formed in my throat, as I asked if we were going in circles. We had been driving for over an hour and, according to my map, the hotel was less than twenty miles away. My taxi driver roared with laughter and assured me we were not. After he gathered his composure, he began to ask me a series of questions about myself and he told me we were not. After he gathered his composure, he began to ask me a series of questions about myself and he told me about his family. Again, he was able to calm my nerves. I knew my prayers had been answered when I arrived safely at The Royal Oasis hotel. I thanked my driver and paid him the forty-dollar fare.

I felt like royalty when I checked in. This hotel clearly lived up to its name. It was obvious why it had a five-star rating. My room was modern in design, with clean lines
and crisp white bed linens. There were gorgeous portraits of the Caribbean Sea hanging on the walls. The bathroom was tiled with luxurious marble. It was not at all what I had expected. I only left the room long enough to eat dinner at the restaurant downstairs. Afterwards, I locked myself in, set my alarm, and drifted off to sleep in the big, soft, cozy bed.

I woke up the next morning and took the hotel shuttle back to the airport to meet the mission team I would be working with. The sun was blazing again as I searched the crowd for people I had never seen before. I wore the team shirt that I received in the mail, hoping someone would recognize it. Thankfully, it worked. Team members arrived sporadically throughout the course of the day, until there were twelve of us. As the sun was beginning to set, we headed out of the city to the town of Merger. A man on the corner dropped his pants exposing himself as we pulled out of the parking lot.

The evening air was sticky, and the same foul smell hung in the air like a dark cloud. As we passed a tent city, the odor became increasingly worse. Trying to focus on anything else, we began asking questions about our itinerary for the week; soon enough we had arrived at our temporary home. I lugged my suitcase up the steep hill and into the house. I made my bed, along with the other girls, on the second story. A sleeping bag on top of a thin foam mat on the concrete floor would be my resting place for the remainder of the trip. At bedtime, someone asked what time we needed to be up the next morning. Our leader simply replied, “Trust me, you’ll know. ”

The sun was barely peeking out from behind the mountain when the rooster crowed. Startled, I woke up from a dead sleep. I could smell food cooking. I stretched and yawned, along with the other girls on the team. It was early. We made our way downstairs, following the scent of breakfast to the kitchen. We found eggs, potatoes, and fresh fruit on the table. A group of Haitian ladies had started preparing food long before we ever heard that rooster, and I was grateful.

I met Pasquale shortly after we left the house. He ran toward me and grabbed my hand as if I were an old friend. He turned to me as we walked along the rocky terrain and shoved his free hand in my face. He began counting in English as he touched each of his fingers. “One, two, three, four, five, six.” He pushed free from my hold and repeated the process on his other hand. Again, he counted to six. I reached out and took both of his hands into mine and examined the extra digits. I was shocked at how proud the boy was of what I would’ve considered a flaw. His smile stretched across his face from ear to ear, white teeth glowing in the sunlight against his black skin. “I’m Pasquale. What’s your name?” he said. “I’m Megan. It’s nice to meet you,” I replied. He again took my hand in his as we continued to the church. My own flawed appearance didn’t seem so important in that moment.

That night one of the girls on the team, Olivia, and I lay on the slanted concrete outside our house, staring wide-eyed at the star filled sky. I poured my heart out to her, not leaving any details out, about the life I had left behind. She listened until I was finished, then quietly said, “I’m so glad you’re here. God has big plans for you.” I closed my eyes, and in that moment the heavy burden I was carrying like a bag of bricks seemed to vanish. We finished the night out, singing Taylor Swift songs and laughing until our sides ached.

Every day was different in Haiti, yet the same. The days were filled with activities from dawn until we were finished with everything on our agenda. We played with kids at the orphanage, shoveled gravel at a construction site, taught lessons at VBS, visited homes, worshiped together, and laughed a lot. No one seemed to notice my blemished face, premature hair discoloration, or the few extra pounds I’d put on. They weren’t interested in my physical appearance at all. They only cared about my heart, which they, unknowingly, helped to mend a little each day. The Haitian people and my team quickly occupied a large piece of my broken heart. Suddenly, there was a peace in the putrid air as a small portion of God’s plan was revealed to me. I thought I was running away from my life, but instead I had found it. Every morning the rooster crowed, and I rejoiced in a brand new day.
I looked up at my father, his tall figure standing in front of the dark window. It was early in the morning; the sun had not yet risen. The airport where we stood was cold. The room felt hollow and the bland colors that filled it seemed to blur together. The emotionless voices that came over the speaker starkly contrasted the sea of emotions around me. Suitcases surrounded us. To my right, parents hovered around students, saying goodbye for the week. My father hovered around me and my brother, but he was saying goodbye for much more than a week. The automatic doors slid open and a crisp November breeze snuck in, disrupting the controlled environment of the small airport. I felt my skin tingle and my eyes dared me to cry. I refused. “It is only three years,” I told myself. Many younger than me have already said goodbye to their fathers for a lifetime; I do not deserve to shed a tear for a mere three years. I stepped to the side and looked around while my brother spoke to my father. The people there were part of our group and they knew what was going on, but their pity aggravated me. The quiet airport felt like a test tube and the prying eyes around me felt like scientists observing my life. “Just say goodbye to your own child and let us be;” I thought. “I am not a wounded puppy that needs your assistance or your attention.” I let my eyes shift out of focus and I flashed back to the night before.

I thought I would have had a harder time falling asleep, but I did not. I found it odd that I was able to carelessly sleep away the last few hours of that day. I felt as though the mountain of tomorrow looming over me should have left me restless and awake, but it did not. I closed my eyes and drifted to sleep like I did every night. It was late on November 4th, so late that the calendar almost disputed that date. The next morning, I was leaving for a mission trip at 4:45 am. The next morning, my brother and I were taking off for Belize City. The next morning, I was leaving for a mission trip at 4:45 am. I stepped into the guided path and I was suddenly brought back to the airport.

I refocused on the room and shifted back towards my father. I hugged him, then I turned and walked away. My backpack seemed heavier; it was as if the emotional burden I carried had materialized on my shoulders. In a few long steps, I reached the beginning of the line for security. I stepped into the guided path and I was suddenly overwhelmed. The plastic poles with elastic bands stretched between them seemed to close off and move inward. I was overcome and I felt choked by the path behind me and before me. I looked over my shoulder and saw my dad standing precisely where I left him a few moments before. Should I say just one more goodbye? I turned my head back and looked forward. No. I took another step. The opening behind me shut, chasing me and ushering me forward. In front of me, the ropes rushed in and blocked me, begging me to stop. They pushed in beside me, narrowing my path and stopping my feet. From the left, it was mocking me for my lack of strength, telling me to just walk on. I stuffed my hands deep in my pockets and raised my chin and eyes to the podium I was approaching. I forced my feet onward and denied myself the chance to look back again. I soon stood before a man dressed like an officer.

“Passport and boarding pass please, ma’am.”

I forced a smile and handed him the documents. He flipped through the pages and scanned me in. He then handed me a pink pass that showed I was under 18 and didn’t have to remove my shoes.
“You’re good to go. Just follow the path to the next line,” the officer said in a nonchalant voice.

I walked on. I did not have as much difficulty moving forward this time. It was as if that man had put a block between us and I could no longer go back, even if I wanted to. I passed through security and wandered down the stairs to my gate. I cleared my mind and welcomed the numbness that threatened to take over. My father was losing his freedom and his name; in a few hours he would just be an inmate and a number: 19066-084. I tried not to think, to fill my mind with nothing. I mindlessly sat in a chair next to some friends and waited. I waited until it was time for us to board. I waited until it was time for us to take off. I waited until it was time for him to come home.
“Five, six. Five, six, seven, eight and one, two, three, four...” There was a particular amount of gloom in my voice as I counted the team on during their warm-up. It was the first of many competitions that I would not be performing at. I was a first-year captain and our show had a great theme. And yet I wasn’t going to perform because of a dumb ankle injury, and, on top of that, it was little Butterfly’s birthday. Mom and Dad were throwing her a birthday party at the old Skate Inn. She was upset with me for missing her party. It seemed like I was always upsetting her. I just kept thinking my life couldn’t get any more miserable, but I was soon proven wrong.

With five minutes until performance, the girls were in their shiny, skin-tight sequin uniforms while I was still dressed in the generic team tracksuit. They were stretching and I was sitting to the side, waiting for the lady to tell us, “Okay, you guys are up. Follow me.” I decided to check my phone, not because I sensed something was wrong or because a voice told me to check it, but just out of sheer boredom. That’s when I saw the message from Austin. I ignored it at first. He was just some kid at school who liked me and couldn’t take a hint. He was constantly messaging me.

The boredom persisted so I decided to open it. “I’m so sorry about your mom!” I will never forget that haunting message. It felt like all the air left my lungs and, with one swift blow, struck my heart. Immediately the thoughts began to circulate in my head. “Oh no, did she fall? She couldn’t be dead, right? Was my sister okay?” I sent him a reply. “What do you mean? What happened?” I didn’t wait around for a response. I called Mom. No answer. I called Dad. No answer. I called my brother. Straight to voice mail. This is when the little voice told me something was wrong. Austin responded, “I think she broke her leg; she is on the stretcher. I opened the message and zoomed in on what was once Mom’s leg. That was when the shock set it. Everything went into a blur. I heard the counting in the background. That was the only thing I knew to do, so that was all I did. I was lying against cold metal and I could feel the worn-out leather against the back of my arms and legs. Lizzie was holding me and telling me to stop counting because I was waking up everyone on the bus. Her slight annoyance turned back into sincerity when she realized I was coming out of my shock. It was dark and we were on our way back from the competition. I didn’t even know if we had won the competition and I didn’t care. We were heading back to Bristol, where the team of doctors were desperately trying to save Mom’s legs and, more importantly, her life.

Mom had been previously diagnosed with Osteoporosis, Fibromyalgia, and acute Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome. The diseases caused her to have extreme pain sensitivity, along with frequent pain, and an overall low immunity for all her bodily systems. Her body didn’t function like that of an active mother. Normally, CRPS isn’t a life-threatening disease. It is triggered by major injury to the body like organ failure or a broken leg. Mom knew she had to be mindful of her fragile body, but she also knew that she wanted our family to have a relatively normal life. At the time, her mild illnesses were being treated with great outcomes, so she decided to risk trying to skate. When she stood up, the skates rolled out from underneath her which caused her arthritic legs to buckle.

A severe injury like that couldn’t properly heal itself, which lead to the development of other lifelong and irreversible health issues. The next year consisted of hospitals, surgeries, and nursing homes, followed by another three years of doctor appointments, specialists, and pain clinic visits. It would be months before my naïve mind would be able to comprehend the complexity of Mom’s ailments. Mom would never be able to walk by herself again. She had become permanently bedridden. She wouldn’t never be able to work or go out. It was her worst fear. She lost control of her life.

I watched this strong-willed, independent woman fade into a withering heap of emotions and pain. I watched our family slowly get torn apart by this tragedy. After the initial shock, I was kicked into gear and ready to face this head-on, but unfortunately the rest of our family had a prolonged shock. During the first two years, I didn’t react or cope at all. I knew this was going to change us all and that we would have to adapt our lifestyles. It was up to me to help everyone else adjust. So I basically became her willing slave. I took on some of the responsibilities of the matriarch role. I took Butterfly to school and helped Dad with chores, all while caring for mom. I did whatever she needed me to, whether it was driving her to Vanderbilt for medical testing...
or just getting her some salted caramel ice cream from the freezer. As a result, I lost friendships, I quit band, and I started paying more attention to her instead of my school work. It definitely took a toll on me. However, I didn't mind it. I would do it again without any hesitation. There isn't a protocol for these things, you just take it day by day. Our mother-daughter relationship was somewhat bipolar. We had our rough days. She was in denial and I was still a moody teenager, but she cared for me my whole life and I was obviously going to do the same for her.

Mom and I both evolved. We have gained strength on many different levels. I watched her break down mentally and then pull herself back together, which took a lot of strength and will power. I knew that I was no longer a timid little girl. I gained the ability to overcome anything. I became less focused on my generational trends and became more in tune with my morals. I taught myself to never take anything for granted, that nothing was guaranteed in life.

I used to be bitter that our family couldn't be normal. I was bitter that God didn't heal Mom or our dysfunctional family. But I figured out that frame of mind doesn't heal. It just leads you down a black hole of despair. I decided to consider it a blessing that my mother didn't succumb to her potentially fatal injuries. It was a blessing that our family persevered through the hardship. I gained a stronger, more positive outlook on life. I learned to find the good in any situation, no matter how grim it may be. I came to the conclusion that there will always be a silver lining if you put in the strength and determination to find it.
I woke up quickly. I thought I was going to be late for school, but then remembered it was the last day of finals, and I didn't have to be at school until 9:00 am. It was only 7:30 am. I walked down the steps of my dingy, gross-looking stairs after getting dressed. I found my mother asleep on the old, broken-down couch in the little living room in our apartment. She had cut her hand on the glass the night before, and the medicine the doctor gave her made her drowsy, so she fell asleep on the couch. My baby sister was asleep on her mattress in the floor because she couldn't sleep without my mother. They looked so peaceful and tired. I walked over to my mom and shook her to wake her up and ask for a cigarette. She gave me one and then asked what time it was. I said 7:30 am, and she told me she fell asleep watching Hello Kitty with my two-year-old sister. I told her that I was going to school to take my finals and for her to go upstairs and get some rest. I left my little sister asleep because if I woke her she wouldn't have gone back to sleep. She was learning how to unlock doors, and we lived in a very rough neighborhood, so I just left her asleep. I waited until 8:00 am, when my friend Elizabeth arrived to pick me up for school, to smoke my cigarette because I could've really used one before my final exam. On the drive to school we inhaled the cigarettes slowly as if we didn't want them to be finished.

We arrived at school and got out of her blue and white pickup truck. We walked in, went to study hall, and waited until 9:00 am to go to our exams. My first exam, History, started at 9:00 am and lasted until 11:00 am. I took my final with complete and utter confidence that I was going to pass, but when I turned it in, my teacher said I had failed by only a few points. I stormed out of his room to lunch and sat with some of my close friends who were all talking about their exams and how they had passed with flying colors. By the time the bell rang for us to go to our last class, I was almost to the point of screaming.

I went to my last class, which was Web Page Design. It was my favorite. I thought for sure this would put me in a better mood. I was almost relaxed and enjoying myself when my phone started buzzing. At that moment, when I read the message my stepmother sent, my whole world came crashing down. She asked me where I was and if I knew where my mother was. I replied, “No.” She said she had gotten a call from the police department about my mother around 9 am, unlocked the door and went outside. One of the neighbors called the police and informed them that a baby was walking around by herself. They came in my home and treated my mother as if she had hurt my sister. In all reality she had just been asleep for too long because of her medicine.

When I ran to the office I met my younger sister, who was just as distraught as I was. She kept asking me what had happened, and I couldn't give her an explanation. The only thing going through my mind was that it was a mistake, that they had the wrong person. She had never been in jail and was fine when I left. And suddenly, I remembered my baby sister was there, too, and then I became more anxious and felt as if I couldn't breathe. The lady at the front desk saw me panicking and calmly told me and my sister to go wait in the conference room until we calmed down. I went into the conference room and looked up the number to the jail and called them as fast as I could. My sister told me to let her talk to them because I was crying and shaking so hard at this point I could barely speak. She asked them if they had my mother there and they said, “Yes.” Then she asked, “well, what did she do?” They told her they could not give that kind of information out. She was getting frustrated now. She said, “I'm her daughter, and I am at school and all I want to know is what she did so I can work on helping her get out.” Tell me what her charge is now!” The officer on the other line replied with a slight smirk, “she was charged with Child Neglect, ma'am.” My sister's face became very pale as she hung up the phone. We both burst into tears holding each other for what seemed like hours. My teacher brought my things and attempted to calm us down. She was also crying because she cared about us. My stepmother came to pick us up. I could still smell the gross, molded food in her car as we drove to my apartment.

When I arrived, I was greeted by my father and my grandparents, who told me that my sister was taken by her grandparents. At that moment, I knew I'd never be able to see her again. Her grandparents had been attempting to take her for a long time; they hated my mother because she left their son.

That morning, my baby sister had woken up before my mother around 9 am, unlocked the door and went outside. One of the neighbors called the police and informed them that a baby was walking around by herself. They came in my home and treated my mother as if she had hurt my sister. In all reality she had just been asleep for too long because of her medicine.

When I went into my apartment, there was puppy feces on the floor from our new puppy we had just gotten and was house training. I saw my sister's mattress laying on the floor, and her covers were where she had left them. I grabbed her stuffed bear and thought about her beautiful
smile and her chubby little cheeks, and as the tears streamed down my face, I lost it. I broke down in the middle of my gross-looking floor and cried out for my mother and sister. My grandparents and a friend at the time, Kelsey, looked at me as if I were crazy. But in my head I was thinking everything was my fault; I should've stayed longer.

The maintenance man came and told us that we had only fifteen minutes to get our things and get out, that they were locking our apartment. My father was there and said he had custody of the rest of us and to come with him. At that time, I hadn’t seen my father in six years. I was so hurt and mortified that I had to stay with him because my mother was not there. We packed up what we could - only some clothes, some covers and some pillows - and set out for the twenty-mile trip to his house.

The ride seemed like it took forever, and my stepmother wasn’t helping much by talking about what had just happened. All I wanted to do was have my sister and mother back, so I could go home. My brother and sisters stayed quiet, trying to comprehend what had happened. I felt so trapped and alone and all I wanted to do was cry, but I had to stay strong for my other sibling. They needed me as I was the oldest.

We went back to his house and waited by the phone for my mother’s call. My sister and I waited in silence, listening to the sound of my father’s children playing and trying to keep my younger two siblings busy; but their facial expressions seemed so lost, as if they were in a new country. When the phone finally rang, we jumped in excitement and I answered the phone. My mother was crying and telling me what happened and apologized for being in jail. When she finally straightened up, she gave me instructions on how to bail her out. I told my stepmother exactly what she told me, and we got to work.

When we had figured everything out, we packed up and began our ride back home. I did everything she asked me to do and went to the jail house. They let her out around 4:00 am. When she came outside, I almost jumped into her arms, so excited and full of joy again. She asked me where we were going, and I said home.

The next morning we went to our court session. To no one’s surprise my baby sister’s grandparents had filed for custody, and the judge granted it to them. I can still hear him saying the words, like a knife piercing my heart. She wasn’t just my sister; she was my best friend, and I thought of her somewhat like my child because I helped raise her when my mother was working long shifts. I visited with Sarah as often as her grandparents let us. She was, is, and will always be my world.
A dusty brown butterfly with rusted wings
Waking up slowly in the soft summer breeze
my bones ache and creak like tired machinery
Exhaling polluted air, as I struggle just to breathe
The sky’s lost in a purple blue haze
Caught in a cotton candy snow globe
of strange beauty and cruel pain
Three quarters of a glowing ivory moon
Seasons are fading
of this year, and my life
it’ll all be over soon
The tiny whispering movements of a lonely
moth catch my wandering eyes
Pale blue wings almost as fragile as the person
crumbling behind this disguise
Sad little houses occupied by broken divorcees
Their fiery orange porch lights splintering
through the dark trees
Trying to outdo the dying sun’s last rays
Oh, everyone’s just wishing for happier days
All the swirling colors, slowing draining away
Night swallows the sun’s last display
as pink clouds gather round the moon
another burning sun stolen by time
I could write a thousand lines about you
and never truly capture the beauty I’ve read
in and in-between the lines
I could never find a word that could begin to define
Everything I’m thinking and feeling about you
in this quickly fading night
And the moon’s pearly white light
Bores into my sunburnt skin
As the fog rising in the distance
Kisses the treetops with murky silver gray mist
Fireflies dancing in the almost-blooming grass
As I try and I try not to get too lost in the past
There’s an ache in my hip and a crack in my upper lip
Spider webs tangled up in my eyelashes
I’ll grab a match and light this field on fire if
you’d like to watch me dance in the ashes
It is an overwhelming 87 degrees
When I decide to take a leisure walk
At Sycamore Shoals Walking Park.
I grab my pad and pen and go.

After about a minute of walking, the path becomes shaded with trees.
Like a canopy in the jungle.
All trees that I don't know the name of.

A jogger passes me by on my left.
She listens to music through her headphones
As she keeps a steady pace.

A few people walk behind me,
Young and old.
The older women talk about their morning coffee,
And the two girls in their early twenties chat about college classes and boys.

The half-mile marker comes into sight
On my right.
There is an outlook of the river.
I take a seat on the park bench
Next to the water.

All is quiet on this Tuesday morning now.
I hear the water splash in some rapids up ahead.
The birds sing in rhythm with the cricket's chirp.
The geese squall,
And chase each other with glee.
Not a care in the world.
Depression is a time of no progression,
It’s a time of recession, held captive by repression.
When your profession is obsession, with your impression.
Your confession is digression because of discretion.
A time of concession to oppression, and suppression.
When possession is because of succession,
and accession to self-harming aggression.
The only decompression is a “special session”;
Talking about how I want to use a weapon.

I go ask questions to get a lesson,
for protection from my own rejection,
almost wishing it’s the inception of an infection
that leads me in a direction to find an affection.

It’s my own self-reflection that leads to my imperfection,
deception with a connection of false correction.
Depression gives me no selection on my perception.
Depression is no election with purpose to freshen.
Just a congestion meant to lessen,
Wise enough to deafen, and creep up like a cresson,
leading to full blown-depression.
Great Plains rangers die
Buffalo zombies scatter
Fallen cowboys cry

They rise hungry now
Yearning for open plains, brains
Silver colt ashes

Gathered again ride
Against the strong winds of time
Bearing their brothers

Of undead demise
Their fiery hearts grow rotten
Towards the glowing moon

Passed’s past forgotten
As they ride hungering ride
Park ranger’s manger
Forest is a blaze; angered.
Clouds of danger wade,
Barn burner runs to the lake.
Crystalized widow sinks down.

Windows burst under
Pressure from the heat inside.
Out goes the healthy.
Home crumbles, fear sets in deep.
Where are the dear photographs?

Decimated with
Your precious mother’s china.
In those walls that were,
Never a bad memory.
Gone forever the good ones.

Lost, we are not though.
Incinerated, maybe.
Valiant hearts shall stay,
In place of the old homestead.
Noble, my cause for rebuild.
**Judges**

**Deanna Bradberry**, this year’s Fiction judge, is a veteran writing instructor for Wythe County Public Schools and Wytheville Community College. She is the chairperson for the Wytheville Chautauqua Festival’s Creative Writing contest committee, and she has previously been the editor for Stitches, The Appalachian Teachers Network publication. She has written for several publications including Stitches, the Virginia English Bulletin, and Now and Then: The Appalachian Magazine. Ms. Bradberry has a B.S. and M.S. in English from Radford University, and she studied poetry at DePaul University through the National Endowment for Humanities Summer Institute.

**Gerrie Fischer**, this year’s Poetry judge, has recently had poems and short stories published in Enoya Review, Westcot Journal, About Place Journal, and The Silver Blade. She holds an M.A. from the University of Maryland and several doctoral certificates. She lives and works on Block Island and enjoys a happy life with her husband and their four dogs.

**Jeanne Shannon**, this year’s Non-fiction judge, grew up on Southwest Virginia, what some call “the heart of the Appalachian South,” and that region still provides inspiration for her creative work. She earned a bachelor’s degree in education (majors in music and French) at Radford University (Radford College, it was then, 1956), and a master’s degree in English/Creative Writing at the University of New Mexico in 1983. Her poetry, memoir pieces and short fiction have appeared in numerous small-press and university publications. She has published four full-length collections of her work and several chapbooks. When she retired from a career as a technical writer in 2000, she started a home-based business—a book-publishing enterprise called The Wildflower Press—in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Her favorite authors include Southern fiction writer Lee Smith, poets Charles Wright, C.D. Wright, and Ronald Johnson, and novelists Virginia Woolf and Eudora Welty. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby and Lee Smith’s Fair and Tender Ladies are among her favorite novels. She also likes to read books on quantum physics and spirituality, and to explore how those two fields are related.
This year’s Visual Art Judge is Joe Strickland. Strickland is an artist working within the photographic medium. His photographs are of minimalist, contemporary design utilizing line, depth, and balance. Strickland’s work is exhibited internationally and has been featured in many juried, group, and solo exhibitions. Recently, his work was featured in the Spring 2017 issue of Ink & Letters, a curated journal of art, creativity, and Christian faith. Strickland has also been selected as a finalist in the Expressions competition, Ireland’s largest dedicated art photography portrait competition and exhibition, which is currently hanging in Longford Town, Ireland. Originally from North Carolina, Strickland earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Technical Photography from Appalachian State University. He then worked professionally in commercial and retail photography for several years in the Charlotte area market before returning to academia to pursue an advanced degree. Strickland earned his Master of Fine Art in Photography from Utah State University in 2012. Now residing in Bristol, Tennessee he pursues his passion for photography along with a rewarding career in higher education. Strickland is Assistant Professor of Photography and Digital Media and serves as Chair of the Digital Media Art & Design department at King University where he enjoys advancing student’s skills and knowledge in photography and art.
 Contributors

Makayla Adams is a 23 year old Sociology/Anthropology double major at Northeast State. She enjoys writing about the darker parts of herself and her past. She believes the things she brings to the surface will resonate with many people on some level. She wrote this piece with a sense of vulnerability that she hopes will be appreciated.

Matthew Bennett is a History and English major, and second year student at Northeast State. He is a hardworking student who refuses to give up despite the odds. Writing is one of his passions and he plans to become a college professor of American History and English. In his free time, he loves to write, read, and listen to music.

Taylore Bivens based her collage, Robin's Nest, off of a photograph that she took of a robin's nest outside of her window. Taylore will graduate soon with an Associate of Arts in Visual Art and Design: Studio Art and continue her studies at East Tennessee State University.

Hunter Eaton is an English major and is in his fourth semester at Northeast State. He enjoys reading, playing music, and hiking.

David Gonzalez is in his third semester at Northeast State. David loves both visual art and music.

Taylor Savannah Griggs has always been a writer and a musician. She's a percussionist. She believes it is magnificent how twenty-six seemingly-small letters can create endless possibilities. She loves to read, and Mitch Albom is her favorite author, and she has a passion for writing.

Abigail Hines is in her second year at Northeast State. She loves playing music and reading and writing poetry and prose, and she hopes that writing will become more than just a hobby someday.

Jessica Howington is 25 and is attending Northeast in order to obtain a degree in Digital Media. She hopes to transfer to ETSU and graduate with a Graphic Design degree. She enjoys art in all forms, and she writes short stories and illustrates them in her spare time. She has one daughter who is her world.

Jenna Jacobs has as much art in her heart as on her hands. She believes everyone is an artist and aspires to become an art therapist. Jenna will graduate this semester with an Associate of Arts in Visual Art and Design: Studio Art.

Haley King is from Kingsport, Tennessee and will graduate from Northeast State this semester with a degree in Administrative Professional Technology. She loves drawing, collaging, and musical theatre.

Samantha Koniak states, "I am an artist and I love every form of art." She is pursuing art as a career and hopes to work in animation.

Taylor Laughren is a 19 year-old student at Northeast State. She lives in Gray Station and loves to write, especially when her life story can have an impact on others.

Ethan Lyle is going on 20 years-old and is from Johnson City. He graduated from Science Hill High School. He wrote his story, "In Flight," for an American Literature II creative writing assignment, and impressed his classmates and his professor with its powerful imagery.

Chandler McCrary is from Kingsport and is a graduate from Dobyns-Bennett High School. He is a first-year student at Northeast State Community College, and he enjoys writing poetry.

Emily Overbey will graduate this semester with an Associate of Arts in Visual Art and Design: Studio Art. Emily works at Hands on Regional Museum. She states that she adores teaching children science and the arts.

Cassandra Parker has a passion for art, animals, and caring for others. She loves cats and hippos, drawing, writing, hiking, exercise, as well as movies, music, video games and the colors purple and green. She states, “I’m a bundle of emotions and express myself best through art rather than words. I have big dreams and hopes for the future and I work hard to reach my goals.”

Madeline Rash will be finishing her first year at Northeast State this spring. Her memoir, "The Strongest Bond," is about what she went through when her mother got sick.
Shayna Richardson is enrolled at both Northeast State Community College and East Tennessee State University (ETSU). She states, “I am a lover of art. I want to keep learning how to grow as an artist. I hope to learn from ETSU as I have from Northeast State.” Shayna would like to thank her drawing instructor, Donna Wilt, for a wonderful learning experience at Northeast State.

Anna Rosenbalm is an 18 year old student at Northeast State. She loves to read books as well as write. She also enjoys hiking and sunsets and is always creating herself. She is inspired by life around her and is excited for what life holds.

Brad Simon has been at Northeast State Community College for two years. He states that pastel is his favorite medium and that his drawing instructor, Donna Wilt, has taught him so much. Currently, Brad works as a tattoo artist. He states that tattooing has been a great learning experience and has contributed immensely to his portfolio.

Jessica Suarez completed her 5th semester at Northeast State in December, and received her Associates of Science degree. She enjoys traveling, and she is an impressive writer. She currently works in a small Italian-American restaurant.

Megan Street is a 33 year old double major at Northeast State with focuses in Pre-Dental Hygiene and Sociology. She has lived her entire life in Tennessee. She loves to travel, read, and cook. Her long-term goals are to work in a prison as a dental hygienist and provide dental care on medical mission trips.

Jose Tavarez is a first year student at Northeast State. He enjoys art and literature.

Runzhou Zhu is pursuing an Associate of Arts Degree in Visual Art and Design: Studio Art. He states that he enjoys working in black and white because it stresses the value of the materials and “provides me more time to think what I can do next in the picture.”
Echoes and Images, Northeast State's student literary magazine, invites submissions of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and visual art.

Prizes will be awarded in each category:

First Place: $50.00
Second Place: $35.00
Third Place: $25.00

The competition is open to current students at Northeast State.

All entries must be original and previously unpublished, and contributors agree that the submitted work may be published by Northeast State in Echoes and Images or other college publications, in print, or online.

Students may enter in all four categories.

The contest is held in the fall semester, and the results are announced in the spring semester.

Poetry, Fiction, and Non-fiction must be submitted online through the Echoes & Images website. An online entry form must accompany each submission.

For Visual Art, students must submit their original works to the Humanities Division Office, H129, and each entry must be accompanied by a fully completed entry form obtained from the Echoes and Images website.

Visual art entries must be picked up by the end of the spring semester in Room L303C.