

A Sense of Place: An Exploratory Study of Appalachia within Children's Literature

by

Emily Ketron

Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

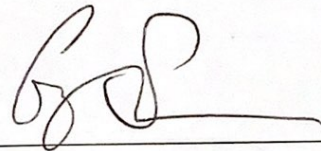
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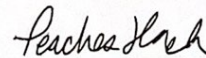
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Approved by:



Greg McClure, Ph.D., Thesis Director



Peaches Hash, Ed.D., Second Reader

Jefford Vahlbusch, Ph.D., Dean, The Honors College

Abstract

The below essay focuses on my thesis project, a children's book. Within the essay, you will find information on the benefits of children's books, specifically how they increase the academics of the children who read them. Along with this, my paper discusses underrepresented areas of children's literature, with a main focus on the Appalachian region. The essay then turns to focus on the specific elements of my book. The various elements include the reasoning behind the words, illustrations, and focus of the book.

Keywords: children's literature, benefits, Appalachia, illustrations

Introduction

I remember being a young girl visiting my grandparents. I always loved traveling from home to visit them in the Appalachian mountains. I grew up in the city and loved being able to see the stars glisten at night, this was something I did not often get to see. One of my favorite parts of my visits to my grandparents house was waking up early each morning. My mamaw was always an early riser, as was I. We were often the only two up and I would go outside to meet her on the front porch swing. The mountain air had a bite to it, but I enjoyed the crisp breeze as we swung slowly back and forth. Each morning, she would pour a cup of coffee and it would warm that crisp morning air. As I got older, I learned of my heritage. My great great grandmother was a Cherokee who grew up in the Appalachian mountains of Southwest Virginia. My maternal grandparents grew up farming the land in East Tennessee and when I would visit them, I was taught how to farm and cook what was grown. I soon began to realize the value in my heritage, also referred to as one's roots. As I went to college in the Appalachian mountains, I found that this heritage of mine meant more to me than I originally thought. As I began to brainstorm ideas for my thesis project, I realized the importance of one's belonging through their heritage therefore I decided to write a children's book titled, *A Sense of Place*. See Appendix for full book.

Reading promotes children's cognitive skills. When reading, children increase their comprehension level, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and analytical skills. Even when children are too young to read alone, "[s]torybook reading by family members, typically parents, provides a comfortable environment for stimulating children's language skills" (Xu et al., 2021, p. 2). This

early form of reading enhances the language development of children. According to one research study, “early (preschool) exposure [] was found to contribute to better listening comprehension” (Eghbaria-Ghanamah et al., 2022, p. 253). Reading also helps younger children improve their “oral language abilities” and “reading comprehension” (Eghbaria-Ghanamah et al., 2022, p. 253). This means that the act of reading with and to children can greatly aid them within school. Children ultimately benefit from reading at an early age because “oral language proficiency in kindergarten can facilitate the acquisition of reading and writing” (Eghbaria-Ghanamah et al., 2022, p. 252). As a matter of fact, young children can benefit from listening to reading, particularly through the practice of guided reading with an adult.

Evidence supporting the benefits of children’s books remains clear. Students are known to increase countless skills when they read. Likewise, the influence of reading is particularly important for children; therefore, I chose to write and illustrate a children’s book. Before narrowing down this thought, my main focus was incorporating my major, elementary education, within my thesis. In other words, as an elementary education major, the top priority for this project was making sure I could incorporate my findings into my future classroom. This thought process, along with the benefits of children reading, quickly led me to the idea of a children’s book. Once narrowed down, I began to invest my time into research and answer a few simple questions. For example, questions like what are the main benefits of children’s books, which regions are underrepresented in children’s books, ways children’s books can benefit the reader, and how can images within these books contribute to the learning environment of the students. After much consideration and analysis of these questions, a missing piece came to light. In other words, research showed a lack of Appalachian representation within the context of children’s literature. Due to this seemingly overlooked region in literature, my focus once again shifted

towards a new direction. In other words, the new subject of my children's book was the Appalachian region.

As the research process began to unfold, the main focus shifted into a book on the theme of roots and one's sense of belonging and heritage. I began to realize that teachers can use books that touch students emotionally in an educational setting. In other words, for books to be an aspect in the classroom, they do not have to be solely academic. Instead, books like mine, that touch on one's memories, can be used to open opportunities for children to explore their own heritage and sense of place, as they relate to the emotions of the characters. Teachers can benefit from incorporating literature by asking students to journal on how they relate to the story. There are therefore countless ways to incorporate children's books, including mine, into the classroom curriculum.

Literature Review

As the theme centers around a sense of roots and heritage, the book plays on the emotional connection to its reader. For example, the story begins with a mom telling her daughter a story. The mom is the main speaker in the story, but the child is the narrator listening in and sharing her thoughts along the way. The reasoning behind that of a child narrator is two simple things. First, the intended audience of the story is children. This allows for each individual child to relate to the narrator because most likely have also heard people in their lives share memories with them. Along with this, as a child, I remember visiting my grandparents' house and hearing my family share stories with me about their child. In other words, I wanted to maintain this part of my inspiration for the story and therefore chose to have the child as the narrator. Additionally, within the story, the mother has a clear desire to teach her child of their heritage, evidenced by the beginning of the story when it states, "whenever we got the chance we

would go visit mamaw and papaw's." The opening remark clues the reader into the fact that the focus of the book is that of heritage and connections to family and place. This is the onset of the theme. As the story progresses, the reader quickly learns of the heartfelt feelings the mom holds towards her heritage. For example, the mom remarks on her joyful experience when her "papaw would always salt his slice, casually telling us "city girls" to spit the seeds out in the yard." The intent of each line in the story is to inform the reader, specifically, the child reading the story, that family heritage and roots remain in place even when they are a part of your memory. The story also teaches children about the Appalachian region, with the effort to debunk stereotypes that others may hold. The story touches on playful experiences like catching lightning bugs.

Additionally, the children's book teaches readers of the common practices of the region like fishing, gardening, and cooking what you grow. These practices are mentioned within the story as an effort to debunk the common misconception that Appalachian natives are lazy.

Unfortunately, there have been countless efforts to "draw[] attention to 'reality television' stereotypes of poor, lazy, and foolish Appalachians" (Rittenour, 2020, p. 284). Along with this the child is reminded of the importance of giving back to the community because oftentimes "news media portrays Appalachians as being ill, addicts, and reclusive and at a large economic disadvantage to other Americans" (Rittenour, 2020, p. 284). However, this mindset is not the case; in fact, the story tells of the grandparents helping others because it debunks this idea of reclusiveness and an ill-mannered nature, and instead reinforces the notion that people from Appalachia are (kind, generous, etc...). For example, children can read the story and recognize the kindness shown by the grandparents when "they would take us door to door, passing out the vegetables we had canned from their garden." Once again, this highlights the community aspect of the Appalachian region. The Appalachian region has strong core values in giving back and

helping others. Overall, the story is meant to contribute to the theme and the central ideals of the community.

Likewise, images within a children's book can make the content more universal to the readers. As mentioned previously, a main focus of my book was to create a book that is relatable to all students, no matter their personal background and differences. One of the ways this is implemented is through images of the story. The images invite students to connect at a visual level of what they are seeing. Some students may associate an image seen on the pages to a photograph in a scrapbook at their house. Other students may find the images relatable because they trigger a memory, such as fishing with a friend or loved one.

Additionally, incorporating images within my children's book helps make the text more accessible to a broad range of students. For example, LeZotte (2021) found that children suffering from hearing impairments can understand or relate to a children's book based on the visual connections that they make. The connection between the images and words in the text helps build comprehension and engagement. In her experience as a librarian, she has seen this firsthand. She described one experience with a deaf child, saying,

her eyes were obviously absorbing everything in sight with heightened sensitivity when I brought out Bill Martin Jr and Eric Carle's Brown Bear, Brown Bear...she understood!

And stopped my hands so she could read the book to me with the skills she'd just learned.

(LeZotte, 2021, p. 4)

The simplistic use of images opened the door for a young child to be able to connect with the written words, without being able to hear them. Likewise, my story offers images to the readers and viewers because it allows children to expand upon the written words and relate to the story via a visual element.

Similarly, when looking at the images within the story, students need to be able to see themselves. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) introduces this idea in her piece titled “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors.” She explains the idea that books need to be like mirrors because they need to be able to see themselves and relate to the text in which they read. To state this another way, when you look into a mirror you see yourself, likewise child readers need to have the same ability when reading a text. In other words, students need to be able to relate to the characters that they are seeing. They need to be able to hold up books as mirrors and see themselves. Along with this, Bishop expands upon her idea by saying that children’s literature should also be like a window, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also “sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). Unfortunately, there are not very many children’s literature books that act as a representation of Appalachia and the books that do often reinforce stereotypes of the region. According to Heather Dent, who conducted a study on 48 Appalachian themed children’s books, Dent “counted only 6 picture books that definitely depicted houses with indoor plumbing with clues such as sinks or hoses” (Dent, 2017, p. 1). Additionally, Appalachia represents a vast group of people approximately, “a culture of 20 million people living in 406 counties in 13 states” (Valentine, 2008, p. 104). However, within Dent’s study, “The only ethnicities represented were white (88%) and black (12%)” (Dent, 2017, p. 2). This creates a lack of accurate representation for children living in the region therefore creating a gap within children’s literature. Ultimately, this leaves these children underrepresented and unable to relate in the way Bishop describes.

Bishop goes on to inform the reader that literature can act as a mirror for those engaging with the book. In other words, this means that the text is relatable to the reader, to the point

where they feel the piece in which they are reading is a reflection of themselves (Bishop, 1990, p. 1). As children are reading a text or scrolling through the pages, looking at the images, students should be able to relate to what they see. Unfortunately, this practice is not a common one, as many children often do not feel represented amongst the images that they see. In fact, research, from a study on Diversity in Children's Books in 2018, reminds us that many cultures and representations are not present within children's literature (see Figure 1). Children's literature featured only 1% indigenous characters, 5% Latinx, and 10% African Americans.



Figure 1 Diversity in Children's Books

After learning about these saddening statistics, I decided to make my visual representations simplistic without children seeing the main character. In other words, when examining the images that accompany my story, one may note that the main character is not visually represented. Instead, the actions of the main character are what the reader sees as the

visual element. For example, one portion of the story reads, “I anxiously awaited the springtime, when the gardenia began to bloom. That signaled we would soon return for a visit and I’d wake up early to meet my grandmother swinging outside in that crisp morning air.” The image accompanying the words on the page is that of a gardenia flower in full bloom (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 Gardenia Image in Children’s Book

Instead of making the image of a single child smelling a gardenia, all children can relate to what they see. In other words, the focus shifts from how the reader resembles the main character, to how the reader has shared previous experiences being told in the story. Through the use of simplistic images, readers from all walks of life, cultures, diversities, can relate to the story that is being told.

My Book

After making the decision to write a children’s book, I began my writing process with the mindset of telling a story. The initial intent involved incorporating three things: my major (elementary education), minor (Appalachian studies), and concentration (math, science, and technology). However throughout this experience, the focus shifted from encompassing each

overarching theme to narrowing down the main idea. In other words, through this course of study, within children's literature, there seems to be a lack of content discussing the Appalachian region. The acknowledgement of an underrepresented region is not uncommon, in fact, other authors have "wonder[ed] why Appalachian children's titles were so scarce when the region's literature for adults was enjoying a renaissance" (Roberta, 2010, p. 3). Similarly, children's literature often does not encompass the greater Appalachian region or the communities within this region. Additionally, those growing up in the region may struggle to envision themselves as a meaningful character in a story; ultimately, "many of today's Appalachian children need to find literature that will reflect their way of life and values" (Asbury, 1995, p. 2). Allowing children of the Appalachian community to be represented within literature opens the door for them to connect and relate to the story on a deeper level. However, children's literature often bypasses this community, leaving communities of many to remain unseen. This saddening realization transformed my thought process, as I began to see a need waiting to be filled. As these thoughts resonated with me, both disappointment and excitement arose; I decided to focus my children's book on Appalachia.

After narrowing down the main focus, I initiated my writing process. Due to the shift from my original idea, I ventured from a factual story to a conversational approach. For example, I began to brainstorm ideas on potential ways to relay important details of the region through the eyes of a main character. As noted within my story, a mother is telling her daughter of her time visiting her grandparents. The mother recalls her fond memories and experiences of visiting them deep within the heart of the Appalachian mountains. Although my story is portrayed in this way, my original work was in fact much different. For example, originally I began to tell the story through the eyes of a grandmother. The first line currently reads, "Mom crawled up onto the

couch next to me, and began to tell me a story, about visiting her mamaw and papaw's house in the Appalachian mountains.” However, what the reader may not know is the original piece stated, “I crawled up on the couch wearing my house shoes and mamaw began to tell me a story, ‘when I was your age...’” Narrowing down my main characters and ideas was a significant part of my writing process because I was then able to focus on the main theme of my book, heritage.

After analyzing the content of my story, I began to add clarity to my ideas by allowing there to be a connection between family roots. For example, I wanted my story to extend beyond a grandmother and her granddaughter. I desired for my story to highlight the roots and heritage of a family. As mentioned previously, I value the idea of belonging through heritage and believe that this is an integral part of the Appalachian community. Likewise, I wanted the idea of one's sense of belonging through their heritage reflected within my story. In other words, every reader has a heritage. Although some young children may not know what their heritage is, this book clues children into this idea and opens the door for them to begin exploring their own heritage. Ultimately, it allows for children to begin to wonder and critically think about their heritage and where they came from.

In addition to the importance of familial roots, a main focus of my story stemmed around the traditions of the region. For example, when reading the children's book, one may note the imagery surrounding various chapters of the mother's life. The story reads, “Mom paused for a minute, and as I listened, I could see that she missed her trips to those smoky blue mountains. She looked back down at me, saying, “you are a lucky little girl living so close to your grandparents.” This simple section highlights the region's beauty, as well as the connection of the community in the area. Along with this, one ongoing tradition is the connection the community shares with one another and the land. Appalachian gardening traditions are long standing in the

region therefore I incorporated words within my story that focus on gardening, such as “They would take us door to door, passing out the vegetables we had canned from their garden.” Lines like this within my story highlight the practices of the region and ultimately contribute to the longstanding traditions of Appalachian heritage.

After researching and narrowing down the content of my story, I began to shift my focus to the images within my text. At the start of my illustration process, I jotted down ideas. In other words, the main focus of my image creation was to correlate the images with the content of the story. In order to begin this process, I wrote down ideas that I could potentially include within my story. For example, one of the pages in my book reads, “That reminds me, one day in science class, I remember we were planting seeds. As I sat there, feeling the dirt between my fingers, my mind wandered and I longed to help mamaw in the garden.” After analyzing the words for this page, I began to think of ideas such as, the characters gardening, a girl playing with the dirt, a plant, and a school. As I brainstormed ideas for this page, I then narrowed down these ideas within my sketches (see Figure 3).

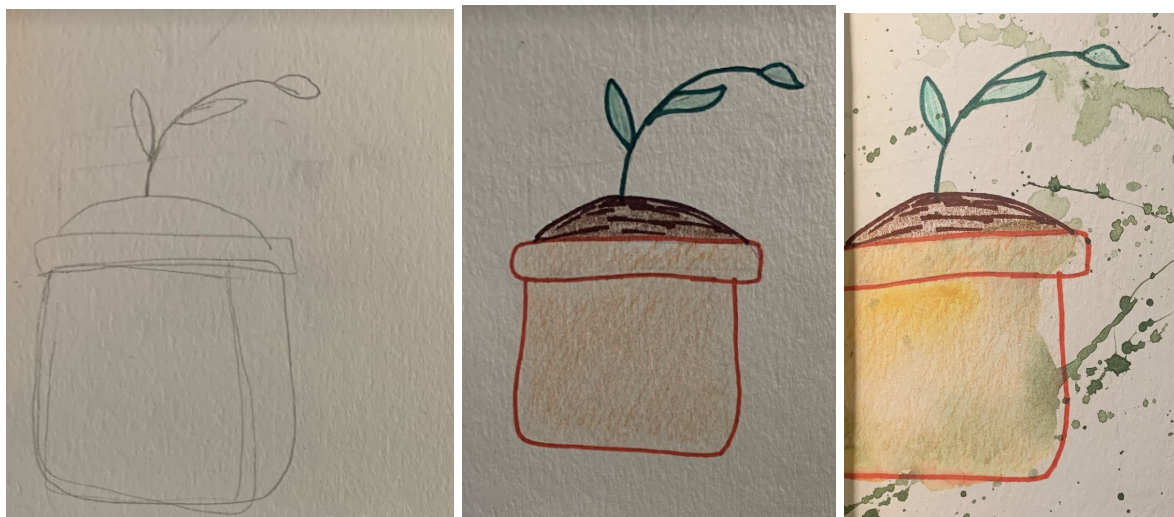


Figure 3 Process from Sketch to Final Image

For example, as I kept my goal to remain aware of all readers, I chose to create a casual and playful image for those reading my book.

As I continued to advance my images, I began to determine which form of media I would want to use. For instance, originally I planned on creating images only using colored pencils. This soon changed, as I realized my desire to make my images playful for children. I found that by only using colored pencils limited me in my ability to create splashes and playful details across the page. I soon realized that I wanted these images to be fun, with an element of abstraction therefore I decided to use watercolor as my main source of media. By mixing the use of colored pencils, watercolor, and Sharpie, I was able to create an abstract set of images that contributed to the playful elements of a children's book. The first image I created was the image of lightning bugs in a mason jar. This image also began as an idea, quickly transformed into a sketch, and then into watercolor. Although I enjoyed the element of watercolor on the page, I realized that something was missing. I decided to use Sharpie and other types of markers to add detail to the images I had created. In doing this, the images remained simplistic and playful for a child. Decisions around images and colors are important in children's literature. Wiesner (2022) discussed the importance of the making connections among all the images in a text, stating

The connections between each of the pictures are critical. It must be clear how and why every image relates to the one before and after it. Text can easily say that the story has moved ahead in time or into a different location, but pictures must show those things happening in a way that doesn't confuse the reader. It's okay if the visual connections are subtle. (p. 56)

Likewise, I felt that images within my story should display subtle connections to the words on the pages. For instance, note how each image has one main focus taken out of the words. In other

words, there is one main subject to each visual representation. Drawing from Weisner (2022, p. 56), my “visual connections are subtle,” leading the reader to make inferences about the words in correlation to the visuals.

Although simplistic, the use of mixed media aids children’s analogical awareness. Throughout the process of reading my children’s book, various elements, colored pencils, watercolor, sharpie, etc., contribute to the mixed media content within the images. For example, the use of colored pencils and watercolor contribute to the abstraction of my visual representations. In other words, when children have the ability to see a representation of what they are reading, it promotes their understanding of analogies within the world around them. Abstraction through mixed media elements in children’s literature require “transferring conceptual information from one domain to another—in this case, from the picture book to the real world—requires children to recognize the abstract relational structure between the two domains” (Strouse et al., 2018, p. 3). In other words, children make connections based on what they view in reality, as they relate them to the visual representations they can see in an abstract form (see Figure 4).

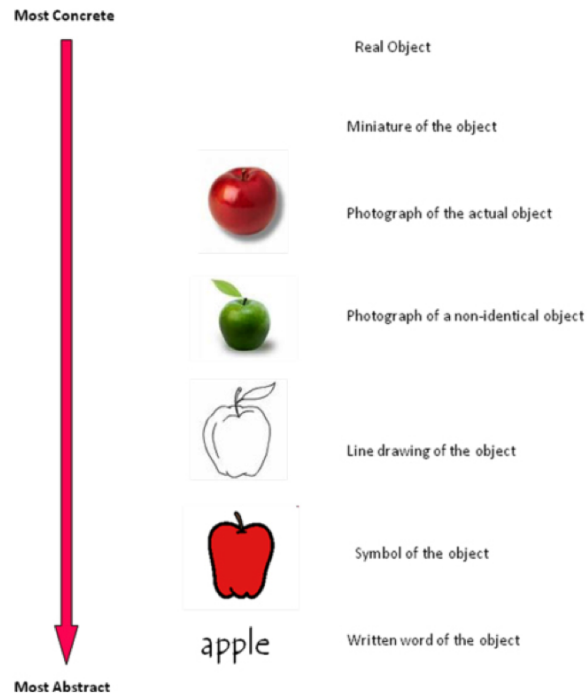


Figure 4 The Idea of Visual Abstraction

Within Figure 4, an apple is analyzed as a visual object that goes from concrete (the real life form) to abstract (the word usage). Likewise, within my story, children's analogical awarnesses increases because the readers are required to make connections between the concrete form of objects to the abstract images on the page. In other words, as children read my story, they can relate the words they read and images they see (abstract) to the objects and items they have seen in real life (concrete). For example, one of the images represented within my children's book is that of a fishing pole. At the end of the fishing pole is a depiction of a fish and a splash of blue watercolor (see Figure 5).



Figure 5 Children's Book Image of Fish

The image is an abstract representation. For instance, there is no real form of water on the page, however, the child reading can use their analogical awareness to connect the blue watercolor splashes as a representation of water. This simplistic form of imagery leads the child to make the metaphorical relation that the image represents a fish being caught from a body of water.

Additionally, mixed media representations have the potential to increase a child's vocabulary and understanding of the text they read. For instance, students may be unaware of the meaning of a word; however, visual representations can trigger an awareness of the word. Providing "visual features may be important when learning vocabulary, where children may be fairly successful at transfer on the basis of matching up perceptual features of objects," (Strouse et al., 2018, p. 8) ultimately, allowing the child to connect unknown words to representations amongst the images. For instance, a child may be unaware as to what a gardenia is, but through the use of colored pencil and Sharpie depicting a flower, the student can make the connection that a gardenia is a type of flower (see Figure 2). Utilizing mixed media features within my book promotes child engagement and improves learning that is supported by "researchers [who] have

argued that extra book features[] engage children with the educational content of books can support learning”(Strouse et al., 2018, p. 11). Children ultimately relate mixed media visual representations to reality, allowing for an increase and promotion of analogical awareness and vocabulary.

Children’s literature highly benefits many students across the globe. It opens the door for students to see themselves as a character, inviting their imaginations to soar. Meanwhile, children’s literature increases students’ academic skills such as their oral language proficiency, comprehension, phonemic awareness, and more. Although some regions, like Appalachia, are underrepresented within children’s literature, the benefits of children’s literature are countless. My book invites readers to not only see themselves through the character of the daughter, but it also invites readers to learn about their heritage, as they make personal connections through both the words and the images. My children’s book invites the reader to connect on a deeper level as they recognize their own sense of place and belonging. Ultimately, doors of opportunity open for children when they read my book, as they too can find their sense of place in the world.

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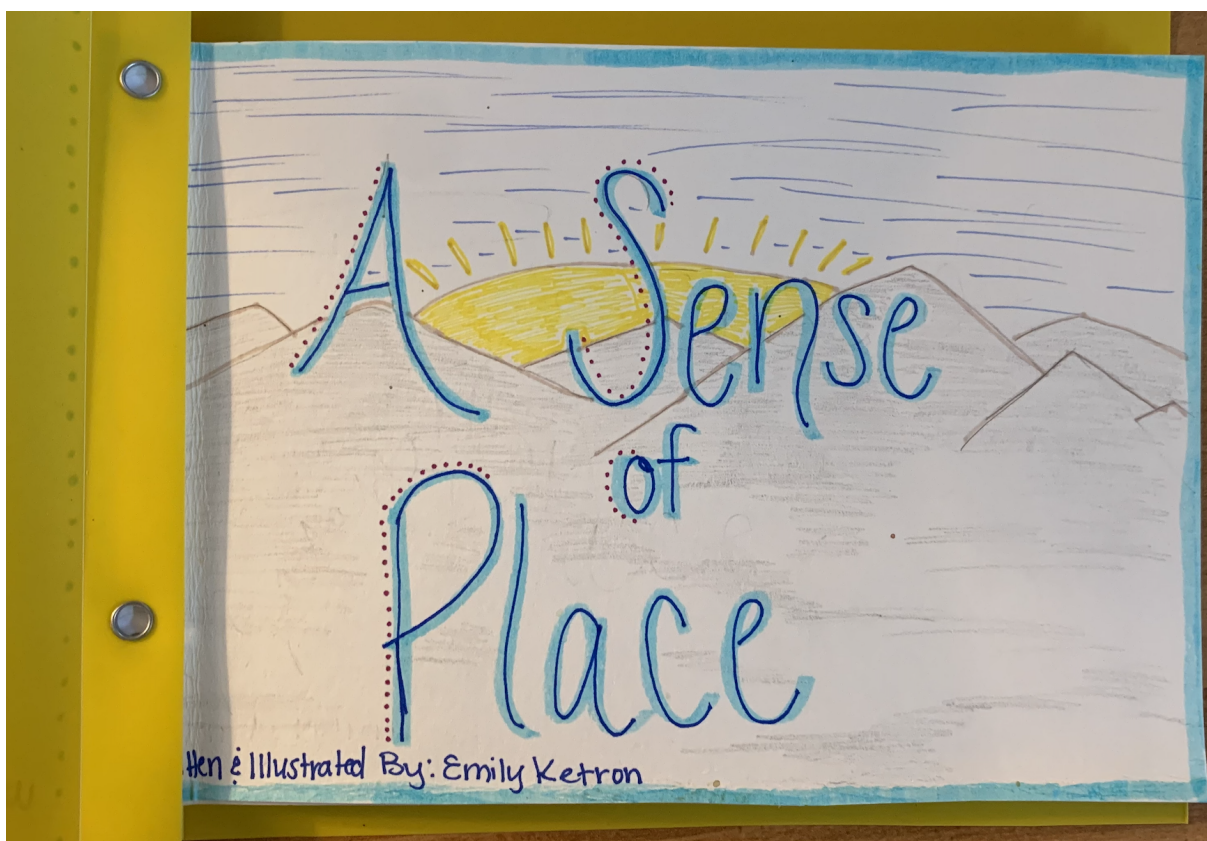
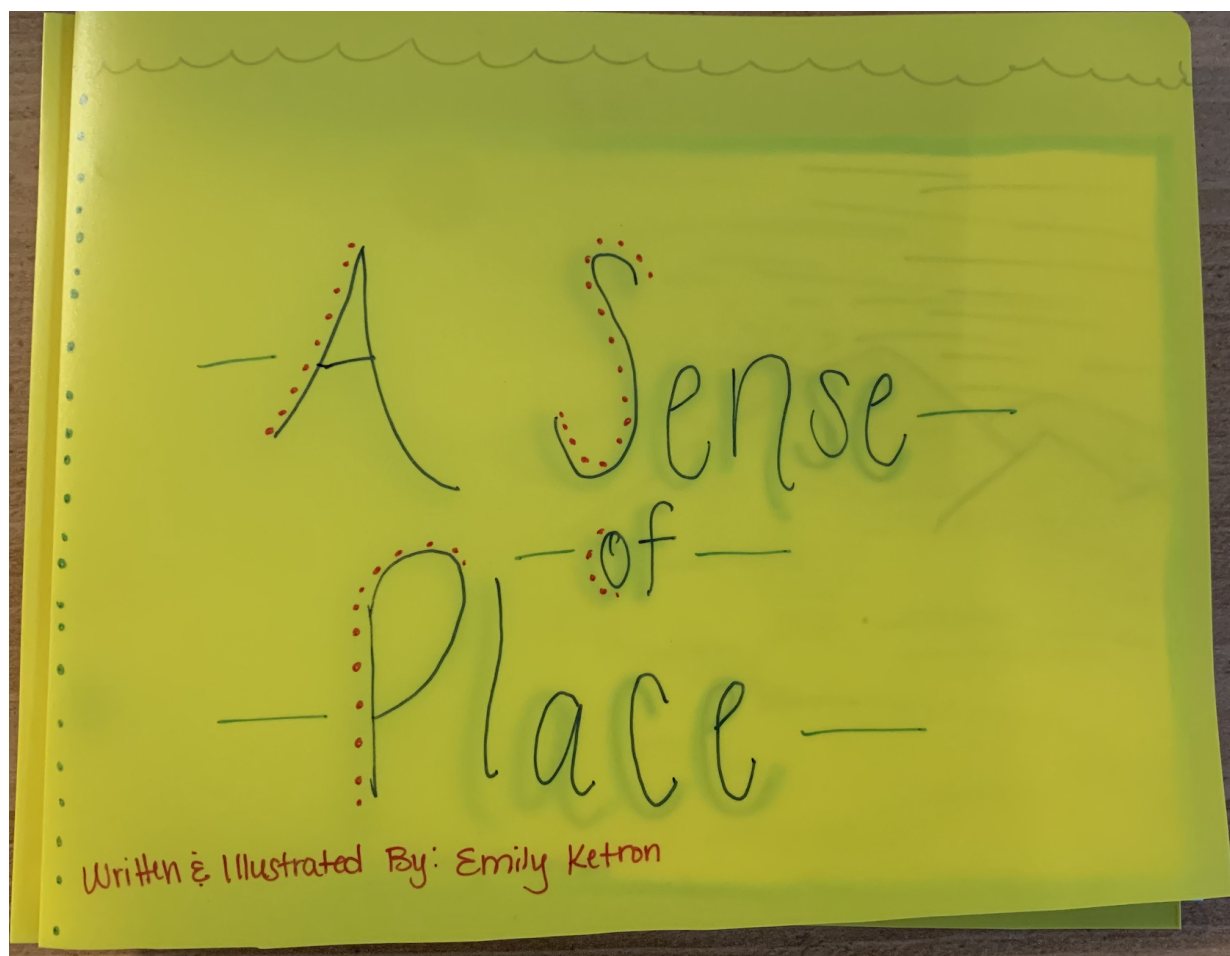
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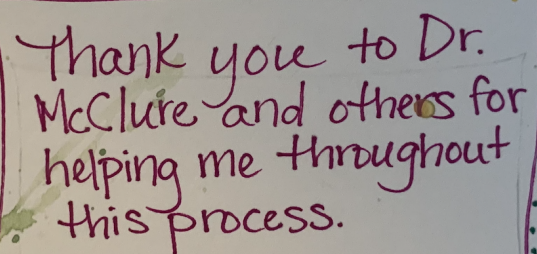
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Appendix

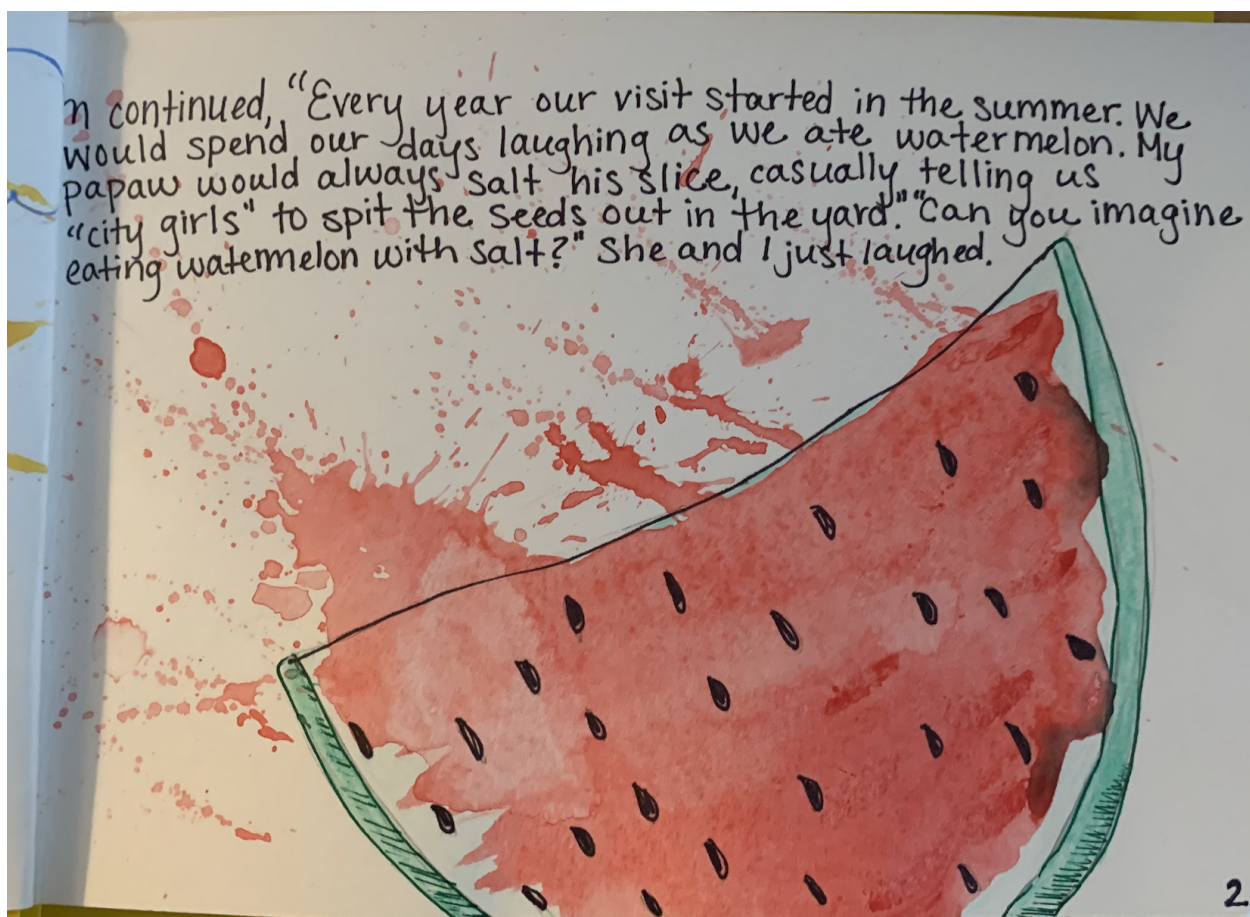


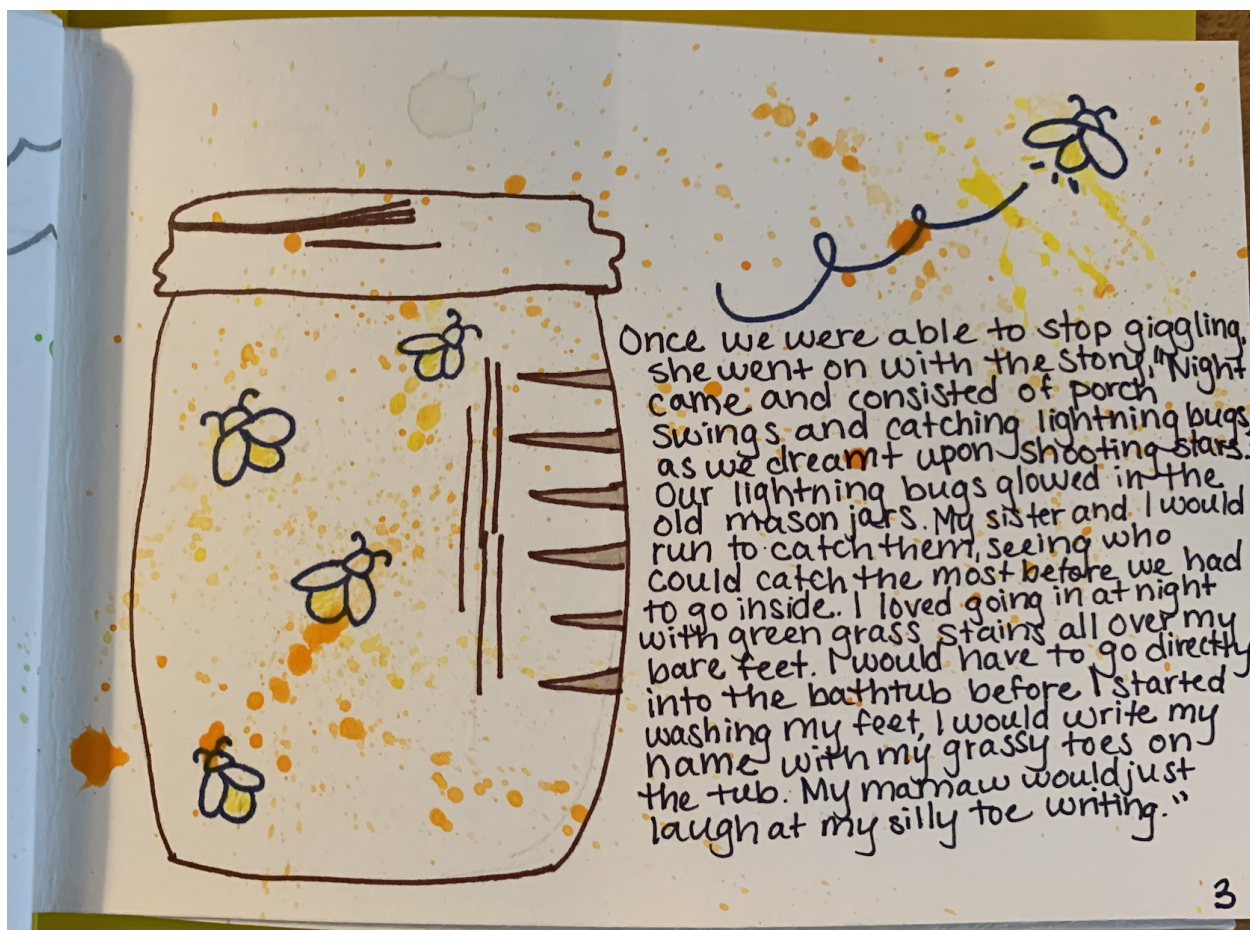


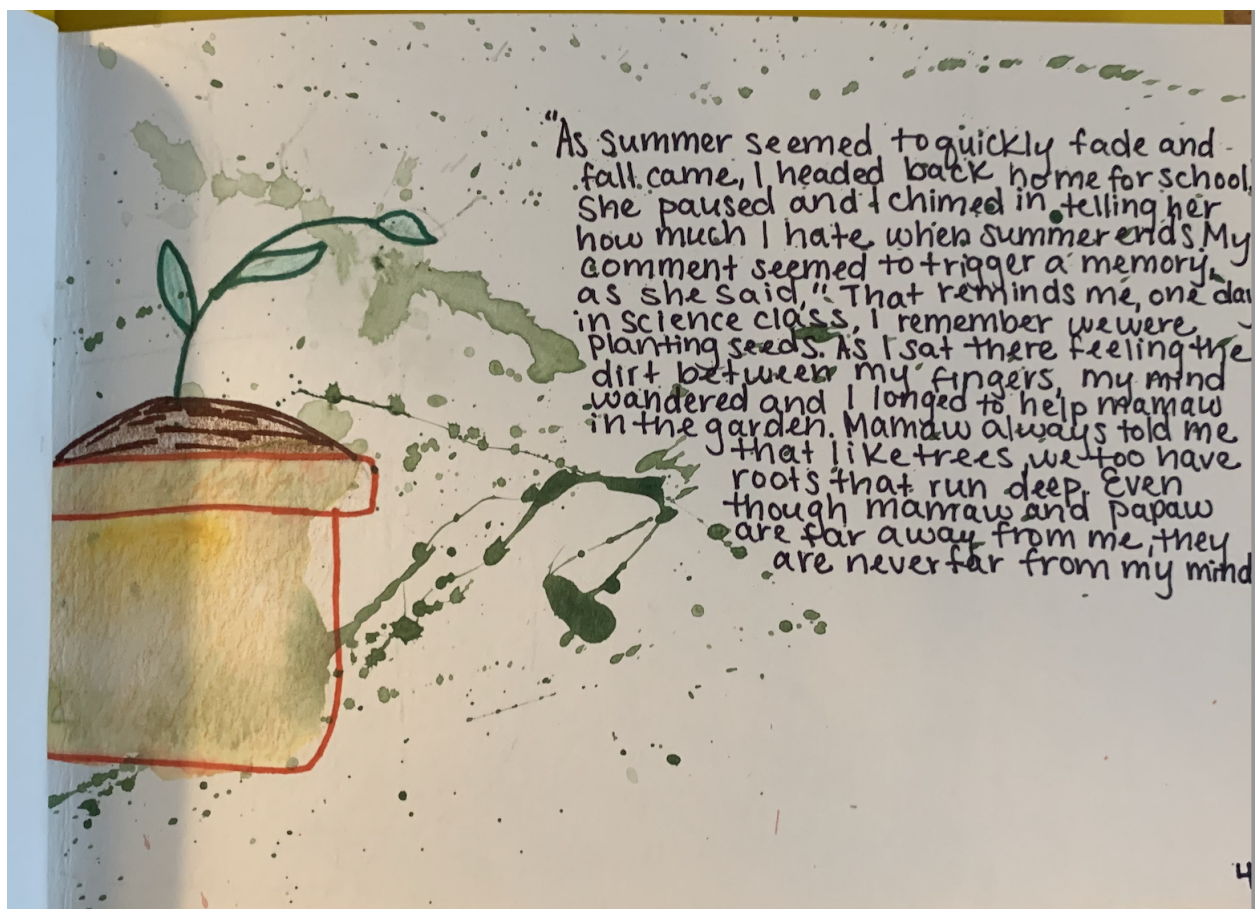
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this process.

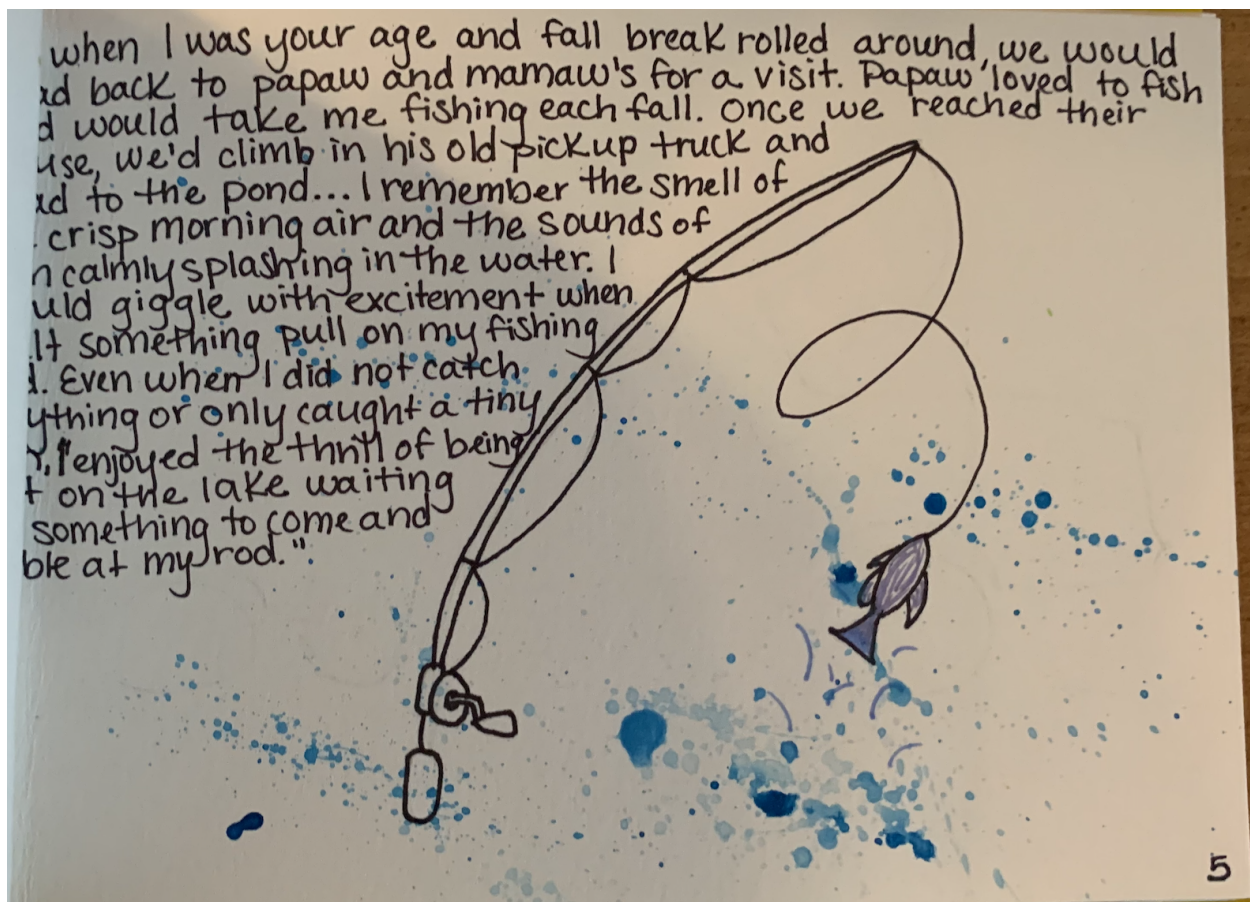
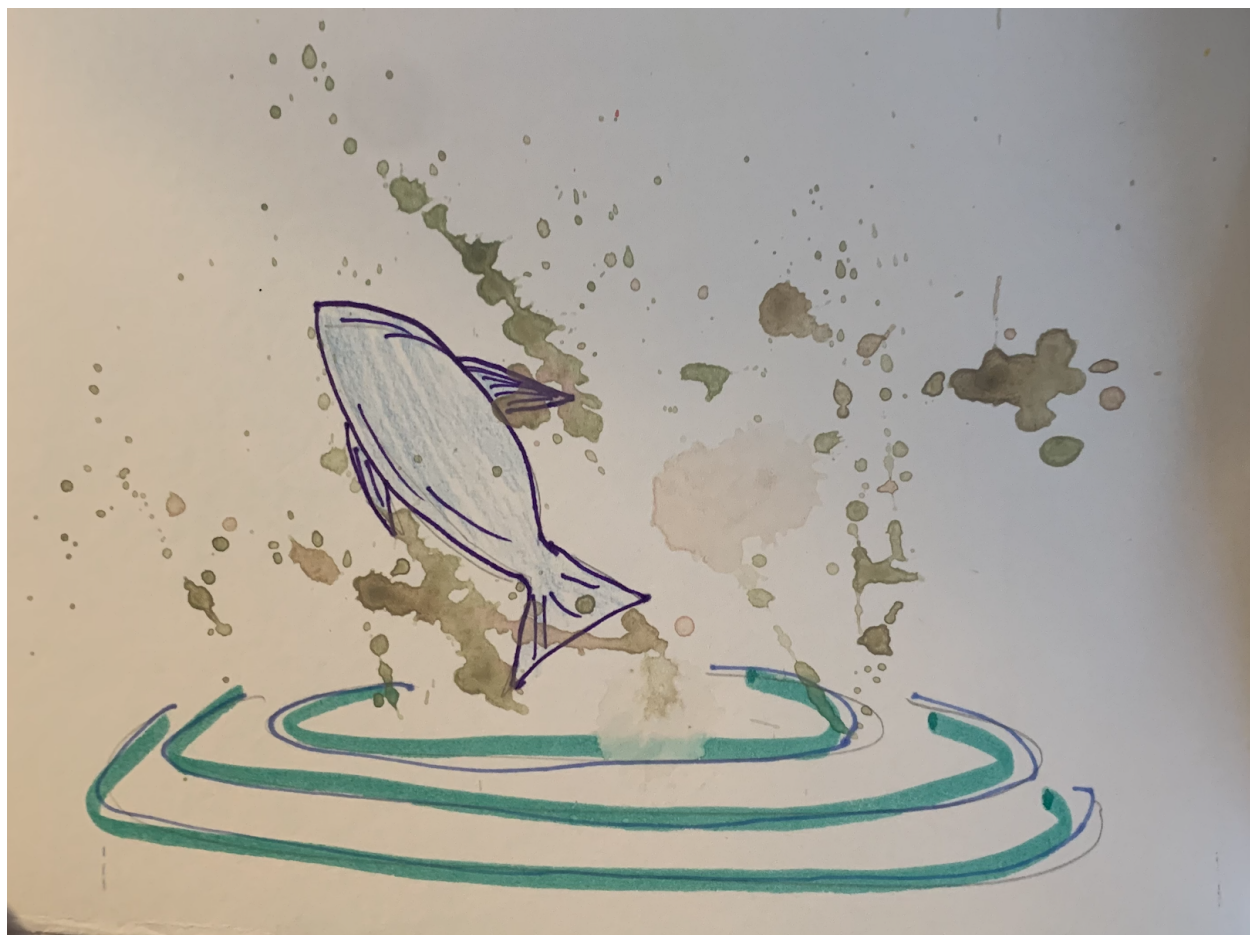


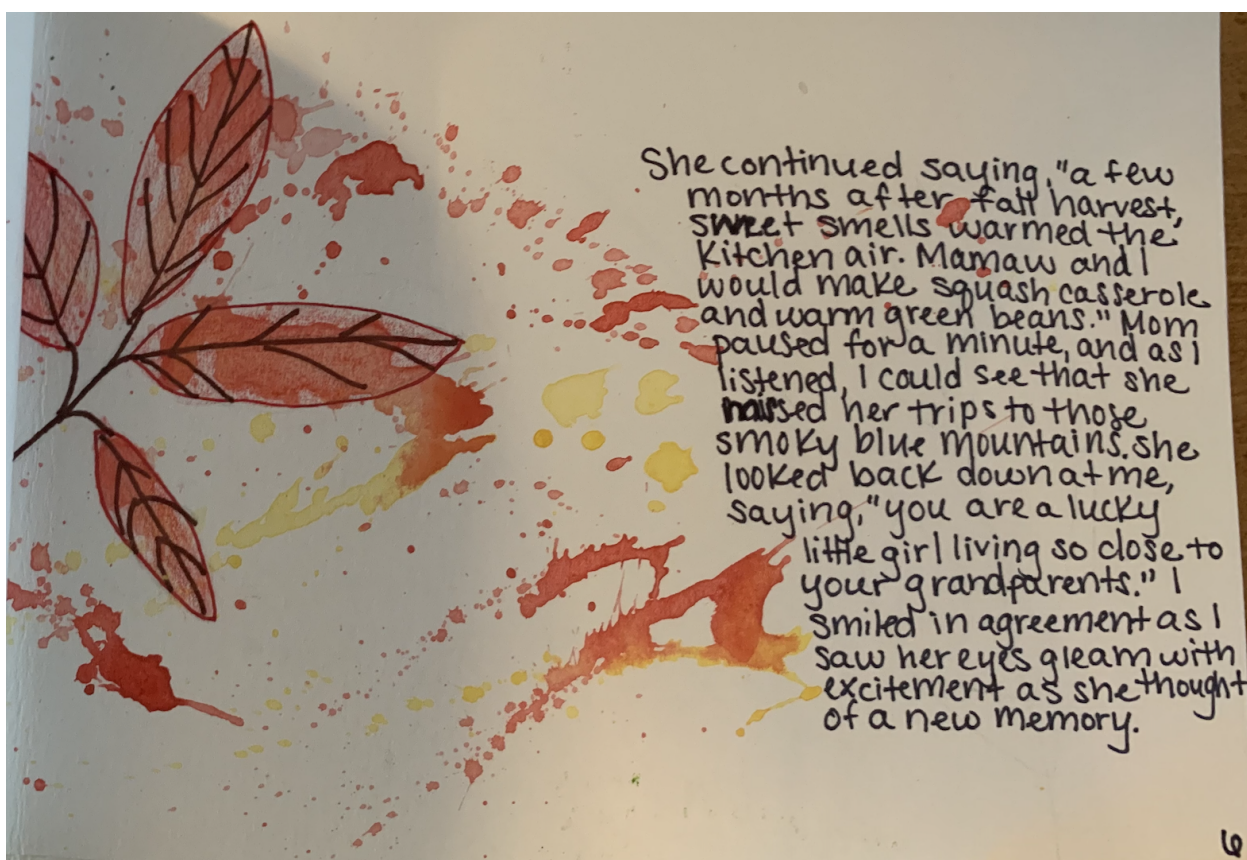
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Mom carried on saying, "December came and let me tell you... there's nothing like a Tennessee Christmas, the snow lays thick and heavy on top of the trees. As a little girl, I remember seeing the candles glisten in the window and presents rest peacefully under the tree just begging to be opened. Papaw and mamaw always loved the holiday season. Their eyes would light up with joy, as they reminded us that Christmas was a time to give to others and bring the community together. They would take us door to door, passing out the vegetables we had canned from their garden."



