Throughout my lifetime, stories have fed my imagination, provided refuge from reality and supplied an emotional outlet. When I was 16, I read “The Glass Castle” by Jeannette Walls and for the first time, I saw my reality in a story. The book recounts the unconventional, poverty-stricken upbringing Jeannette and her siblings had at the hands of their deeply dysfunctional parents. At that point, I realized that the life I had always known, shouldn’t have been normal, but I wasn’t alone.

There’s something about being told you’re loved by someone who could hurt you at any moment. It creates a never-ending feeling of cognitive dissonance. My parents suffer from a mental illness that made growing up feel like life was about survival. You didn’t take time to celebrate the good because you were too busy taking cover and hoping that the darkness would pass soon. When the darkness did pass, you still felt cold and empty. There’s an overwhelming, confusing, and restlessness that just sits in your body. You grab onto the things that give you any sense of comfort and stability, which in my case, is my siblings.

In my work, I’ve reconstructed the memories of my childhood that still remain. Each image is created in the perspective of my siblings and I. My brother and two sisters recount their memories of our dad, while giving me the power to create a photograph of their story. These portrayals allowed me to take control of the narrative and confront the reality I’ve tried so hard to escape from. Seeing a hard memory right in front of you is unsettling and liberating. In these images, I’m not just recreating a scene of our life, but capturing the undertones and the essence of it too. Through this process of reconstructing a memory, I analyze my childhood in stand-still moments, processing, and rebuilding myself. I reach for the closeness and transparency of my parents while trying to unravel the mystery of who they are. I reflect on the family I no longer know and celebrate the one I have now.

I cannot change the reality of what I experienced growing up. I cannot fix or take away the mental illness that has diseased my family for so many years. In “The Glass Castle,” Jeanette Walls writes, “You should never hate anyone, even your worst enemies. Everyone has something good about them. You have to find the redeeming quality and love the person for that” (pg. 52).

Lilly Dyer has a BFA from Marshall University with an emphasis in photography. She is a photographer interested in how photographs can connect people and how they can communicate a narrative. She is interested in the conceptual idea where the “decisive moment” can be created by artificially constructing scenes for photography only. Rather than capturing the moment, she intends to make specific choices when staging images. By consciously placing elements and arranging compositions, she intends to create events, environments, or emotions. She uses photography to connect herself with people and to celebrate the value of human life. Although our experiences are different, our vulnerability inadvertently unites us all. In her work, she wants the photograph to give a space for her to laugh or reflect at the ironic, bad, and happy moments in life.