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illumination 2017-2018

Authored by J Moffett

6.0" x 9.0" (15.24 x 22.86 cm)
Black & White on White paper
40 pages

ISBN-13: 9781986350280
ISBN-10: 1986350282

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illumination
the literary journal of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College
2017 - 2018

Front Cover art: "Vanitas" by Amber Castro
Contest Coordinator: Jennifer Moffett
Contest Committee: The Language Arts Department, Jackson County
Campus
Journal Sponsors: The Language Arts Departments of the Jackson
County Campus, Jefferson Davis Campus, and the Perkinston Campus
Contest Judges: April Lawson, Ashleigh Ferguson, Barbara Lee, and Tara
Garriga
Journal Editor: Jennifer Moffett

All entries were blind-judged. Each judge selected his or her top choices
in the order of rank for the winners. Artwork was provided by Marc
Poole, who selected pieces from students in art classes on the Jackson
County Campus.

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"Vanitas" by Maria Lawrence

My Scars by Makayla Cuevas

I have a collection. All over my body, I have a collection of scars. Everyday objects turned into weapons. Little trips and falls that left more than just a bruise. More than once I've been called clumsy. Then there are the little scars. The ones that I love the most because they aren't so easily seen, but they are easily remembered. Each of them has their own story, a catalogue of memories that can be browsed and recalled by just a glance.

There are more marks on my right hand than there are on my entire body. A thin white line splits the back of my hand, perfectly in two, almost like it was planned. After giving it attention, a cat decided it didn't want me to leave. A white crescent marks the place where my finger was almost lost. Washing the dishes is not for the weak. An ordinary object, such as a broken coffee mug, can become a weapon if dropped just right. Not all are perfectly white. The smallest mark on my hand, a tiny, pink, angry dot, is smaller than a pencil eraser but bigger than a pin head. A fish hook made its home in the middle of the back of my middle finger. Unfortunately for it, it forgot to pay rent and was abruptly evicted from the premises. The hole it left is almost unnoticeable and any other tenant will never know. The rest of these white lines are the result of several overzealous cats.

Okay, almost all of my scars are from cats. The very first scar I remember was given to me by my very first cat, a fluffy orange one that two five-year-old kids named Max. Compared to our gold fish, Max, Max was always the center of attention. Until he split my top lip in two. That's when he became our outside cat. I don't remember much about him, like what his meow sounded like or how he like to play, but I can still picture that one moment. That fast ball of orange followed by a sharp pain and blood forever immortalized in my head.

I like to show off my scars. They're my proof that my life isn't all that boring. My life is filled with cats, coffee mugs, fishhooks, and cats. Each time I tell a story, it becomes more and more exaggerated. Maybe someday, I'll tell a story about how my finger was actually sliced off or perhaps that I was attacked by a very small lion. The human memory is like the telephone game. Each time a memory is recalled, it gets distorted a bit. One day, those memories will become stories, completely altered and unrelated to the original event, although still every bit as interesting and entertaining.

Some of my scars are invisible, but I'm lucky. These invisible scars of mine are tiny, barely relevant or remembered. Others aren't so lucky. Their scars are huge, they weigh them down and dictate their entire lives. These emotional scars. The ones that hurt the most and the blemish that marks our memory. A scar marks that time a husband was killed by a car. All scars aren't bad. Some can mark the smile or the one hello that stopped a suicide that day. A memory is a scar that is lashed into the brain. All are influential and last forever.

Scars are considered blemishes, a fault. Almost everyone believes that they are ugly and that they need to be covered up and removed. On the other side of the spectrum, they're seen as trophies. Marks to be shown off as proof of great victories. They can also make great introductions to a story. The ones that were acquired through silly means. The ones by accident or even the naughty ones. These blemishes are titles to great stories. My blemishes. My stories. My scars.



"Organic Still-Life" by Cassidy Jordan

First Flight by Sidney E. Searles

Waiting in section nine at the Mobile Airport, my nerves began to go wild. I knew that my plane would begin boarding shortly. A few moments later, the voice of the flight adviser began to fill the room. "Can group A please begin boarding now." I glanced at my ticket to check what group I was supposed to board with. I was in group C. As the flight adviser continued to call the next group, I followed in line behind the people boarding with group B, so that when the flight adviser called group C I would be ready.

Once I made my way onto the plane, the flight attendant helped me to my seat. I was thrilled to find out that the plane I was on offered free movies to watch, considering I had a three-hour plane ride ahead of me. After everyone had boarded the plane, the pilot came on over the intercom. "Welcome to flight 22A heading to Colorado, this is your captain, Nick, speaking. Looks like this is going to be a smooth ride passengers." I buckled my seat belt and began to get ready for departure. My face filled with a terrified look as the plane began to move.

The flight attendant that was seated next to me noticed the look on my face. "Is this your first flight?"

"Yes, so I'm just a little nervous," I answered.

The flight attendant chuckled. "I still get nervous when taking off, and I've done this job for sixteen years now," the flight attendant said as our conversation began to ease the tension that I had built up.

After the brief conversation I had with the flight attendant, I put in my headphones and started a movie to pass the time. I finished about one and a half movies before I realized that the plane was about to land. The pilot came on the intercom once again. "Alright passengers, welcome to Colorado. I hope everyone had a smooth flight. Thank you for flying with us." With the plane coming to stop, I grabbed my bags and got in line to exit the plane. Once I set foot into the Colorado Airport, I mumbled to myself. "That wasn't so bad after all." After, I began to search for my father through the crowd of people, excited to tell him how my first flight went.



"Vanitas" by Darlene Ross

A Fractured Fairy Tale by Megan McGee

It is a dark night, but the palace is shining.
Elegance and opulence are swirling about the ballroom, in the form of satin, silk, pearls, and diamonds.
Smiles flash beneath masks of crimson, ebony, and ivory.
Music weaves between the dancers, directing their steps.
The prince takes another bow, finishing another minuet with another grand duchess who means nothing.
But then...
Then she appears.
The milky white dress flows across the floor, the dainty gloved hands rest prettily on the thin waist, the proud shoulders raise a proud neck, the coy smile peeks from the alabaster mask, the platinum hair curls into an elaborate style over the half-hidden face.
The crowd parts for her.
The prince stares in wonder.
A waltz begins, the prince in black and the lady in white join hands, their feet glide across the floor.
The crowd is transfixed by the beauty of the lady. Whispers dart behind feathered fans.
Who is she?
The dance turns into another, and another. The prince dances with no one else this evening, no one else but the mysterious and enchanting lady.
Hours pass. The masquerade is relentless.
It is two minutes until midnight. The drinking and the dancing are in full force. The prince does not see the white lady.
He looks for her.
The ornate clock above the mantle begins to chime twelve.
Bong.
A chandelier shatters on the ballroom floor. The people scatter, the music silences.
Bong.
Twelve smartly dressed masked men stride through the archway and towards the masked dancers, forcing them back.
Bong.
The white lady glides to the chandelier. She turns to face the people.
Bong.
You repulsive rats, she cries.
Bong.
You don yourselves with your riches.
Bong.
You show off your palaces with grand parties.
Bong.
You drink the best wine.
Bong.
My people are starving!
Bong.

Our children are begging outside your gates!

Bong.

My father is dying!

Bong.

It ends tonight! She removes her mask, throws it to the ground. The people gasp. She raises a single candle.

Feel! Our! Pain!

Bong!

The white lady hurls the candle. The flame catches a curtain, grows and grows. The dancers panic, begin to run. The masked men draw torches, hold them to any surface capable of holding fire. Satin and silk are burning. Dancers are screaming. Opulence and elegance are crumbling. The white lady glides out of the archway.

At the top of the palace steps, she turns, watching the fire reach for the moon and stars above.

Bending, she removes her shoe, sets it daintily on the top step.

The prince, choking, gasping, runs from the smoke. He stops short of the step, bends and picks it up.

A single glass slipper.

He falls to his knees in despair and rage, and calls after her, the infamous revolutionary, destroyer of kingdoms, the arsonist assassin.

CINDERELLA!!!!!!

A slow smirk spreads across her lips, and she throws back her head and laughs.



"Self-portrait" by Robert Pittman

The Code Office Chronicles by Paul Redmond

"Don't lie to me!" I yelled. "My alarm went off! I look out the door and you are standing there fumbling with a blue ladder right next to my new truck, which now has a new blue dent!" My voice abruptly broke the sleepy silence that could only be achieved through the sloth-like movement of employees at the Harrison County Code Office. That hot summer day had started much better than the events that unfolded in the afternoon. There are those moments in life that we just wish we could go back and change.

I had won an electrical job that morning, gathered all my materials, and decided to pull a permit before proceeding with the work. Having just purchased a new truck, I quickly fell into the habit of parking away from the most active parking spaces in an effort to keep my vehicle free of dings from buggies and car doors. While filling out the permit form, I heard my car alarm sounding a warning chirp in the parking lot. I rushed over to the door to get a visual. Looking out, I noticed a code official had parked his county truck as close as possible to my vehicle; in addition, he was standing between our vehicles placing a blue ladder onto his overhead ladder rack. Not wanting to lose my spot in line, I brushed off the alarm by telling myself, "He probably just bumped my truck with his ego. I'll just scan for damage before I leave."

After finishing all the paperwork for the electrical permit, I walked out to my truck and noticed a big blue dent that only could have been caused by the young code official's careless maneuvering of the ladder moments earlier. Calculating all the options and disadvantages of implementing those options, I decided to do what any man of sound mind would do. I went back into that code office to give him a chance to confess and apologize. In theory, this could have gone well, had he just done what I expected and broken down into tears as he spilled the beans on himself. Instead, the authority having jurisdiction chose to deny that he bumped the truck, and he claimed he never heard the alarm go off. I could have still backed out at this point.

As the situation escalated, I found myself surrounded by seven code officials and three administrative assistants. (Apparently, the code department was not underfunded at this time.) This congress of county employees did not give off a vibe of de-escalation; in other words, it felt similar to the tension created in a middle school locker room when students start the energy building fight chant. Out of nowhere, a Gulfport Police officer appeared, giving me the chance to shift the focus. "Officer, you are just in time!" I blurted out in a needy way. My false sense of safety was shattered when the officer held out his hand in a "stop right there" gesture as he said, "Oh no, I am just here to eat lunch with Frank." Of course, Frank was one of the well-dressed men already present. I will never forget the way the officer smiled after he said that; the way John Wayne might smile at a bandit whose end is inevitable.

Finally, some tension was relieved when the officer suggested we all go look at the damage. Eager to present the gouge left by the ladder, I led the crowd out to the crime scene where the big blue dent had somehow transformed. With all those eyes looking at the dent, it had turned into a tiny blueish ding. It was just a little dimple. One of the code guys walked over and rubbed much of the blue scuff away, along with any dignity I had left. The officer was left with no choice but to dismiss my claims by offering an accident report, which he graciously pointed out was useless because the insurance deductible was more than the cost of repairs. Having lost my key evidence against the criminal, I reluctantly vacated the premises.

This might seem like a narrow escape from bad decisions made while anger flowed through my veins; however, life was not done with this lesson. The next day, I had to pick up some large item at Lowe's that required one of the big pushcarts. After making my purchase, I headed out to my truck and as I got closer to the vehicle I realized that the D-shaped handle of the cart seemed to align perfectly with my new dent; in fact, there was no doubt this was caused by the handle of a pushcart, maybe even the one I was pushing. I swept up my pride and went back to the code office where my apology was accepted. Often life will grab our focus with one emotion, while underhandedly delivering a fistful of perspective in the end.



"Organic Still-life" by James Bell

Journal Report by Stephen Donnelly

Out of all the assignments that we have been given, I have been dreading this one the most. My mind, when asked to pick a publication to where I would send my work, for once, fails me. I have no idea where to begin. No journal of record that I am familiar with pops into my head. I checked to see what the other classmates had submitted. I have never heard of the journals they suggest, except for *Scientific American*. I didn't even think there were journals publishing short stories and poems anymore. I thought it was all Internet and click bait.

I ransacked my bookshelves to see if I had any old writing journal magazines, but all I found was a Short Story compilation from 1957 featuring Shirley Jackson, Eudora Welty, and all those guys: Steinbeck, Joyce, and all.

The idea of submitting poems or short stories to a magazine or online is not one that I entertain very seriously. Something about it strikes me as unseemly. But I wouldn't mind if I were dead and somebody stuck my stories in an anthology or collection.

Joshua McClennen an English professor at the University of Michigan compiled this particular collection in 1956. Joshua McClennen may be a bit stuffy in his introduction, but he is not unkind. However, it does seem as if he doesn't simply like all stories, but perhaps only the ones he enjoys reading. It is easy to forgive him his bias for "optimistic story telling" as his favorite type of writing as, according to Mr. McClennen, "it provokes a lively classroom discussion." That seems fair enough. It is 1956 after all.

I cannot imagine what the rights to reproduce these stories were in 1956, but Mr. McClennen does mention that although his teaching preference is to have the student read several stories from each writer, it was impossible to secure permission to more than one of Ernest Hemmingway's stories. The one story's title is "The Capital of the World."

I swear, I think we who write are all mentally ill. Why this compulsion to write and have people read us?

I dream my two-year-old daughter drowned right in front of me, five minutes ago. It woke me out of a sound sleep. I have no choice but write about it:

From the river's edge I see her submerged in the cellophane water. My wife is running towards me, screaming, as I dive in the river. I can see my daughter sinking towards the brown inlay of silt in the basin. She is two years old and sinking quickly. Individual pebbles watch the futility with sparkling, immovable eyes. Slowly, my daughter stops moving. Her little behind hits bottom. Her long hair obscures her face. Her hair has never been cut. In the water, my arms will not move, she's dying right in front of us. My wife watches helplessly from the shore. My arms will not move. I struggle to break the paralysis, and with gargantuan effort my hands grasp my daughter's still body.

I pick her out of the river and blow air into her mouth; her belly is full with water. I hold her upside down. I am frantic. I am panicking. I want the water out of her. I try to remain calm. My wife is there, watching my attempts to rid our daughter of this water. She is silent. Our daughter is bloated and still from this water. There is a dab of river blood on her face. Why is there blood on her face? I am losing my reason and logic. She makes a sound that is halfway between a laugh and a death rattle, but she is still full with water. It won't come out. I can't get the water to come out! I wake from terror.

It is well after midnight, into the wee hours. I know I will not sleep again. I leave my wife in bed, and walk into the dark house. I turn no lights on. I need it to be dark. I want these images to stay with me. I want to face whatever this is. I want to challenge it, touch it.

I want to go into my daughter's bedroom to see that she is fine and sleeping soundly, but I won't. I won't be a slave for superstition. I won't be a slave for fear. I'll stay up and write. I'll write about the clarity of the water, about how I could see pebbles gleam beneath her sinking body, about how she struggled under it and finally stopped, about how I didn't get there soon enough. I'll sit here and try to think of the perfect sentence for each horror. I'll write about it, but I will not send it to a journal for consideration of publication. That is obscene.

Isn't it enough that I have to write it?

When I am eleven, my sister and I witness a man dying in front of us in New York, yet all I see is the quality of the snow and the stubble on his face; the mud of the ground, and the melting, deafening bark of small stumps growing out of the ground. His mouth moves as a fish out of water. He looks surprised. His name is John. He is having a heart attack, but we do not know this. We find his behavior comical; when he falls to the ground my sister and I kick snow in his face, and run into the house. On a clear morning highway in Oxford, I witness a black truck drift into oncoming traffic. There is only one small white car traveling in the left lane. The impact is spectacular and unimaginably beautiful. Reflected rainbows of safety glass spray in a terrific cough as drops of glass mist and gleam in the perfect Saturday morning sunlight. The stark, blue sky frames the two vehicles as they pirouette together several feet from the lines painted on the black top. My wife and son are driving with me, and as we approach she tells me to get out and see what happened. Why, I ask her. Just go, she says. The passenger, a girl, has died instantly, but the driver is crushed and folded into the plastic and metal of the small white car; he is folded into the *fabric* of the car. They are brother and sister. I come around the rear of the car, and I can see that the brother doesn't understand. He is confused. He looks at me uncomprehendingly; he wants answers: all I can think of are the sentences that will describe the way his face looks like baked beans, and how his sister looks like sleepy boneless pudding. Their trunk had been blown open by the impact; it is filled with groceries. Two boxes of Cheez-Its sit neatly in a plastic bag, amongst the other groceries, looking as grim as tombstones. I sometimes wonder what became of those groceries.

I will write it because as all writers I am mentally ill, and have a compulsion and love for words and sentences. But I refuse to burden myself with the thought that my stories won't get to play in any reindeer games because Mr. McClennen thinks they may be a downer. I write for my children: they have to live with this crap. McClennen and the rest have the luxury of walking away any time they want.



"Vanitas" by Chad Dahlke

The House That Should Be Forgotten by William Bishop

I left my car about a block away. I didn't want it nearby. I wasn't going to run away. I just wanted to see it one last time. The bristling cold was getting to me. I tucked my leather jacket in tighter to me. I secured my Gulf Coast beanie to my head and kept trekking up the hill. The house was nearby. It's just up the hill and a small portion of flat road away.

I made it up the hill. The small portion of flat road was next. It was so close. I didn't want to get closer but I made myself do it. Come on, I thought, one last time and then never again. I walked about fifteen feet further. I could see it. The dreaded, antique-looking, rock formed house. I couldn't stand the sight of it but I couldn't look away. I looked at the two oak trees in the front yard. I could hear the blue birds whistling in the treetops and along the branches. The memories came to the front of my mind. My mother's fascination with them. The calm that they brought to me when I was scared or worried of my father coming home. I shook my head to try to make them go away. The memories leaned slightly backwards and I moved slowly further – ever so closer to the place I wished to forget but was always on my mind.

I could smell the magnolia tree that was ever-growing on the other side of the driveway. The scent reminded me of how my father wanted to cut it down yet could not, because it was the state tree. I understood his annoyance but thought it was repulsive of him wishing to go against the state laws. The memories collected together wished to pursue to the front of my mind again. I tried to shake them away but they would not leave this time. I walked down the winding driveway to the rock home. The place that I dreaded even thinking about. I looked at the ridged front door. I knew my entire life that it needed to be replaced but my father always refused. I opened the door and basked in the flood of memories.

I walked into the living room. I stooped down to feel the hard wood floor that had been stomped on so many times before. It felt slightly dented, yet smooth to the touch. I shut my eyes, holding back a tear. I stood up and stared at the spot my father loved to sit the most when he yelled at me. It didn't seem so terrifying to look at when he wasn't there. I walked down the hall to the master bedroom. I remembered the times that my sister and I had watched movies and played games. Those were probably the best memories that I had of this cage-like home. I walked back further into the dungeon. I stepped into my old room and saw some of my old books and show music from high school. Those had been my prized possessions. Those old, big, dusty books kept me from ending it all. The pain had been a lot back then. But, by stepping into a fictional world, I continued to suffer, hoping to escape one day. I walked around a bit more and stepped into the kitchen. Oh, how much food was cooked in there that I couldn't eat? I had lost count. So many meals were made for the rest of the family and I was left to fend for myself. It was okay then. I had been used to it for so long. I looked upon the countertop at bottles and cans, strung all over the place. What did they all have in common? They all held the precious liquid that my father holds so dear and the same liquid that had torn me from having a good family and good life. I had grown used to smelling it on my father's breath and handing him one at least ten times a night. I had grown used to seeing him have at least one case every few days. I had never realized what he was doing or why he was doing it. I had never realized how much it ruined my family and my life.

I couldn't take the sight of the cage anymore. I walked back through the house and didn't stop for second looks. I was done with it all. I walked back down the driveway. I had finally let go of the worst part of myself. Now, it was time to do the repairs that that dreadful, awful, rock home had caused me.



"Self-portrait" by Kiehu Sevilla

Searching For My Sister by Matthew Lindstrom

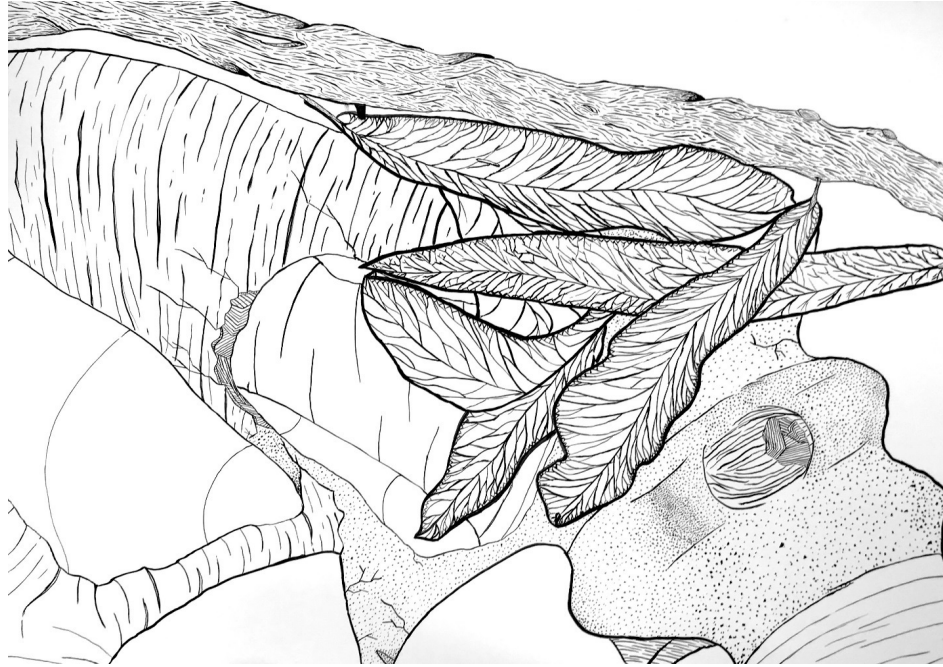
My little sister, like many, tends to make my life much more stressful than it should be. My fondest example of this, even though it was my fault, would be when I lost my sister. About midway into June of 2017, my little sister Addison walked into my room shouting "BUBBY I'M GOING WITH MOMMY!" as my mother followed her while explaining to me that she was taking my sister with her to Gulfport. Of course, having just woken up I immediately forgot everything she said while responding with a simple "okay." I hop onto my computer as I normally do to play a game or two while listening for my sister. With the television still playing Mickey Mouse Clubhouse, I assumed she was on my parents' bed intently watching her favorite show. While she is presumably watching her show, I am struggling with an early stage of the game. After multiple failed attempts to fight a fairly simple boss, my frustration start to grow rapidly. Soon I decide the best course of action is to just close my computer and watch television with my little sister.

Walking into my parents' room, I see a small pile of clothes on the bed. Among the clothes was a bright orange shirt with a pink or purple cat on the front. Remembering Addison wore something similar that day, I mistook the small pile as my sister and plopped down onto the floor in front of the bed. As I started watching the show, I grew thirsty, so I stood up to walk downstairs. I stood up and asked what I thought was my sister "Hey Addy do you want something to drink?" Because I heard no reply, I asked, "Addy, you want one?" Again I heard no answer. Turning to face the bed, I saw that my sister was not on the bed. I assumed she left the room while I was in mine. Naturally, I started to panic.

Running, and almost falling, down the stairs in my house I yelled for my sister. I had not the slightest clue where she was nor where she might be. Sprinting into my grandmother's room, and even bathroom, I saw no sign of my sister. I searched behind the couches in the living room, thinking she might have somehow climbed behind one. Even going as far as to search our small laundry room, I saw no sign of my sister anywhere. Feeling defeated, I trudged over to the fridge and retrieved the drink I was originally coming downstairs to get. A couple moments had passed, and the idea came to me she might have opened the door and walked outside. As unlikely as it may have seemed, I swung the door open and bolted outside. As I shouted for my sister and ran around the house, I quickly realized she was not in the house.

With no sign of my sister, and still no recollection of the earlier conversation with my mother, my mind turned instead of a calming feeling, into a further state of panic. With a newfound state of panic, I continued my search. Running back upstairs and almost tripping over my dogs, I made absolutely sure Addison was not in her room, my room, or the closet. After failing to find her, I remembered my mother mentioning Addison earlier that day. "Addy might be with her!" I said and ran to find my phone. Remembering my phone to be downstairs, I sped down the stairs, but the phone was nowhere to be found. Believing it to have fallen behind or in the couch, I forced the couch away from the wall, so I could locate my phone. After a few minutes and still no sign of the phone, I gave up and decided to try my luck upstairs. Believing my phone to still be on my parents' bed, I decided to check there first. "It must be in my room" I thought after not finding it on the bed. Lo and behold, I found it on top of my computer. Unfortunately for me, the phone was dead.

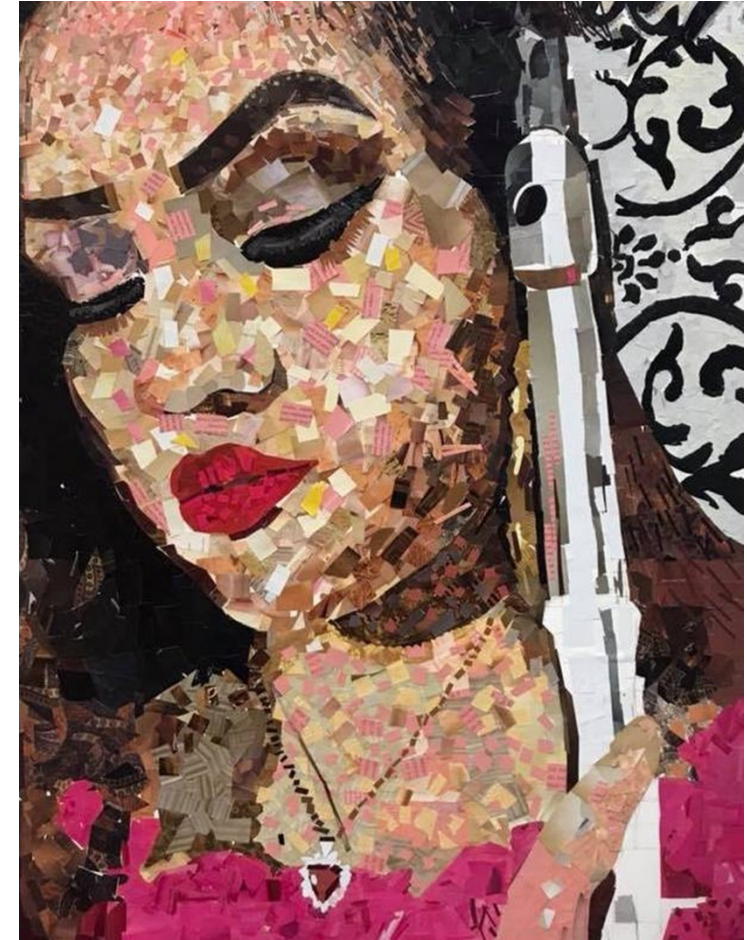
I was so close to finding my sister, but my phone had to set me back another step. Now my only goal was to find a charging cord. Not having a cord in my room, I checked back downstairs near the outlet I normally use. "Well thanks, why don't you just steal all my cords then." I mumbled with frustration due to my family always taking my charging cords. Before searching my grandmother's room, I took another sip of my drink. Searching the outlets near her door, I found no cords that would fit my phone. Checking back in the kitchen, I still found no cords that would fit my phone. Realizing my mother or father had probably taken my cord, I ran back upstairs to find my cord; I was overjoyed to find that it was in the outlet. Finally able to charge my phone, I started to calm down. With my phone finally able to be used, I sent my mother a text message asking her if she had my sister with her. When she did not text back within a minute, I was prepared to call her; then she sent a message telling me she had Addison in the back seat of her car. With the issue resolved, I was finally able to relax knowing that my sister was safe and sound.



"Organic Still-life" by Elvis Rodriguez

Feathered Majesty by Elias Papalambros

I once feared great birds
The crowning kings of the sky
I question such fright.



"Self-portrait" by Maria Lawrence

Light by Samantha Rhodes

In the dark abyss
I struggle to become free
A hand pulls me up

A Hollow Plague by Elias Papalambros

Depression, you scourge
A cold trough of emptiness
Bound to those who thrive.



"Organic Still-life" by Lily Butler



"Vanitas" by Keihu Sevilla

MARY HAD A LITTLE SUBSTANCE ABUSE PROBLEM by Stephen Donnelly

The rubber duck melts on the porous engine as if fondue;
Forgotten, a smoking stink.
White hot the metal grows as if Lilith rising with swelling breast into his
arms:
The engorged Rising Son.
Eclipse the gargantuan hollow of eyeless reflection,
Blinding both firmament and space wordlessly, mindlessly. No direction,
nor pace
The hurt dies, screaming silently
Sisters sit tied to lawn chairs with sauvignon blanc.
The straps betray reddening skin, and still kept secrets win;
Thankful and approving, they lie amongst us
Dispensing radar love.



"Self-portrait" by Christopher Raley

For a Midwinter Morning by Jacob Bieker

Brisk December winds
Cut through my thin cotton shirt
Burn my chapped skin
Cloudless skies of shocking blue
Assault crusty morning eyes
Another tired step
A march to my longing grave
Past the dead, dry leaves
Lone cirrus floats like a wish
On a boundless horizon.



"Self-portrait" by Percy Williams

**Your Cigarette Scorched My Throat But I Still Wear A Smile by
Kevin Reinhardt**

We crept up Huntington Hill
Laid there at the peak all mid-afternoon
Getting grass stains on our favorite jeans
I just watch the ants scamper down the slope

When the acrid dust cloud kicked up you said:
I would like to marry you I think
Knowing how this will end I say: *maybe in a year or so...*

Your cigarette scorched my throat but I still wear a smile
Streams of ants still crawl along
And this is your last defense

Three-year offense to the devoted type
Sitting on the curb I see that vein press against your temple like a scar
You're squinting hard at nothing
Trying hard to prepare for when this will fall apart

I'll scrape my face against the bloody carpet twine
I'll cut my chest just to push you away

Your cigarette scorched my throat but I still wear a smile
Streams of ants still crawl along
And this is your last defense

I'll scrape my face against the bloody carpet twine
I'll cut my chest just to push you away
I'll scrape my face against the bloody carpet twine
I'll cut my chest just to push you away...



"Vanitas" by Thomas Ballinger

Critical Analysis of Heidegger's *Being and Time* by Kevin Reinhardt

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that traditional ontology has forgotten the question of the meaning of being. In introducing his own approach to this question, Heidegger sets himself against the "theoretical behavior" of other philosophers (99/69). Generally, the first step philosophers have taken to understand the world has been to look at the entities in it and identify them one by one as "things" possessing certain attributes and characteristics (91/63). For Heidegger, however, this initial step to abstract "things" from our everyday involvement with the world is fundamentally amiss. Such an abstraction merely represents being ontically—it concerns itself only with the facts about certain entities. It does not ask the proper ontological question of what it means for an entity to be. As Heidegger sees it, the meaning of being must be sought in our "practical behavior" since it is in such behavior that we primarily encounter the world (99/69). It is therefore in practical behavior that our understanding of the being of entities is predicated.

It is on these grounds that Heidegger criticizes Descartes's *Meditations*. To explain the nature of the world and the being of the entities therein, Descartes attempted to clear away all his assumptions and prejudices about them. What he found, in his solitude and neutrality, were two types of substances: the *ego cogito*, or mind, and the *res corporea*, or body (123/90). Descartes cut himself off from practical behavior and just thought about the "outside" world and our relationship toward it (89/62). In such theoretical detachment he found that there are thinking things and that there are extended things, i.e. subjects and objects. As thinking things, our primary relation toward the world is one of "knowing...between subject and Object" (87/60). Descartes's view thus insists that we primarily discover entities as physical objects in the world, which we relate to detachedly through knowing. In Heidegger's language, Descartes's project defines the world merely in terms of its "presence-at-hand" (67/42). It understands the world as being just present before us as a collection of objects, which we thereby relate to as an independent mind through thinking and knowing.

Yet, in order to characterize entities as "present-at-hand," we have to disengage from our everyday lives and the ordinary way we deal with entities. As Heidegger sees it, this move to disengage is the principal failure of traditional ontology. Descartes's method determined his findings at the outset. Because Descartes cast his everyday involvement with the world aside, he merely discovered himself in his withdrawal—alone, thinking, isolated from the everyday environment in which we usually find ourselves. Traditional ontology has always had a prejudice toward the philosophic attitude, specifically in impartial theoretical *knowing* (84/58). Ironically, Descartes's own impartiality privileged this attitude and characterized the world by it. In their prejudice toward theoretical behavior, philosophers have taken presence-at-hand as the typical mode of being. For that reason, they have failed to grasp the primary way we relate to entities in the world. The error of Descartes and traditional ontology is thus a methodological one. They disengage from the world in order to understand it. And yet, we are first and foremost engaged with and in the world.

To understand the being of entities in the world and how we relate to them requires that we investigate them as they are in our practical, rather than theoretical, behavior. In our practical everyday behavior, we are always *concerned* with entities. We care about them and how we relate to them. Theoretical behavior and therefore traditional ontology abstract from this concern. It finds a primary relationship toward the world through our knowing rather than *in* our concern (84/59). Accordingly, Heidegger's task is to find out *how* we encounter entities in our "concernful dealings" with them (96/67). Such a task aims to exhibit the ontological via the phenomenological. That is, it aims to reveal the being of entities within the world through our phenomenal encounters with them, as they are prior to any theoretical understanding. In Heidegger's view, there is no "outside" position into which we can withdraw and achieve a neutral view of the world (249/205). Indeed, it is only by virtue of being situated within a world that it can become accessible to us in the first place. The task of Heidegger's "fundamental ontology" is thus to explain how being is accessible to us "*before*" theoretical understanding and its subsequent categorization of being (34/13, 71/45). We must therefore turn toward our understanding of being as it is rooted in our everyday practical behavior.

For Heidegger, we usually encounter entities in the context of the "environment" (94/66). In using this term, Heidegger does not mean to suggest anything "spatial" (94/66). Instead, he uses it to indicate the world of our everyday being "which is closest to us" in terms of our concern (94/66). In the environment that is closest to us, we always encounter entities as "equipment" whose mode of being is characterized by its "readiness-to-hand" (97/68, 98/69). In our practical behavior we discover entities as equipment to be used in the service of our everyday activities, as "ready-to-hand" (98/69). Right away, we can see how this differs from the view of traditional ontology. Whereas traditional ontology begins with the distinction between material and mind, Heidegger's fundamental ontology finds this distinction secondary, coming only after we step back from the practical. Rather than remaining forever outside as an independent mind, we are absorbed in activity with entities. We are primarily *involved* in the world and in this involvement we relate to entities as equipment to be taken up and used in the service of our dealings. The world and the entities therein are not simply "out there" for us to know. Rather, they are an integral part of who we are and what we do in our everyday lives.

For Heidegger, we can only discover the being of equipment in its readiness-to-hand through practical, rather than theoretical, behavior. To be sure, we discover it through acting and not looking (99/70). Heidegger uses the example of hammering to emphasize this point. He writes: "The hammering itself uncovers the specific 'manipulability' of the hammer" (98/69). In our practical behavior—as in using a hammer—we discover our primary relation with entities as "manipulable" equipment. Theoretical behavior, on the other hand, does not account for the simple fact that we employ entities as equipment for our own ends. It merely looks at the world and finds present-at-hand objects. Yet "no matter how sharply we just *look*," Heidegger writes, "we cannot discover anything ready-to-hand" (98/69). The theoretical behavior of traditional ontology has always passed over the way we equip ourselves with entities in the world. It overlooks this relation because it is so familiar to us—we use equipment every day. It thereby detaches equipment from the context of its use within the environment and discovers isolate things.

For Heidegger, however, context is essential. As ready-to-hand equipment, entities always relate to a "totality of involvements" (116/84). In Heidegger's language, equipment has the structure of an "in-order-to" (97/68). For example, a needle is used *in order to* carry a thread, *in order to* sew a blanket, *in order to* keep warm, *in order to* sleep well, and so on. We encounter the needle as "ready-to-hand," as equipment at our disposal to be set to use (98/69). The needle is involved in a chain of in-order-to's (97/68). In our most general practical behavior, we use ready-to-hand equipment to produce a "work" (99/69). Our use of the needle is directed toward the production of the blanket. The blanket, as the work to be produced, is thus the "*towards-which*" of the needle (99/70). It is the ultimate product towards which our labor is directed. Moreover, our use of equipment is always directed toward an ultimate end goal, what Heidegger calls the "*for-the-sake-of-which*" (116/84). In the case of the needle, our ultimate end goal is to be warm and to sleep well. Take, as another example, the keyboard I am using to type these words. I am using the keyboard in order to write, in order to produce a paper about Martin Heidegger, in order to ensure my knowledge of a specific topic in *Being and Time*, in order to satisfy the requirements of a course, in order to become a bachelor of philosophy, all so that I may become a virtuous person. Here, the paper is the work to be produced, the "*towards-which*" of my activity, while the end goal, the "*for-the-sake-of-which*," is ultimately to become a virtuous person. For Heidegger, our use of equipment can never be seen outside this totality of involvements. As equipment an entity is always understood "in terms of its belonging to other equipment" (97/68). In our everyday activities, we always encounter entities within a context of involvement. Since traditional ontology abstracts from this involvement, it discovers entities by themselves, independent of the context of their everyday use.

As Heidegger takes care to note, we do not always experience entities as ready-to-hand. Although this is the primary way we relate to the world, it is not the only way. For Heidegger, equipment can always become "conspicuous" (102/73). That is, it can always "malfunction" and pass over into "unreadiness-to-hand" (Blattner 64). It can always break down and become "unusable" or "damaged" (102/73). As long as the needle performs its function properly, it is inconspicuous to us. We do not really notice our involvement with it as ready-to-hand equipment. However, if the needle snaps, it becomes useless to us. We see it for the base matter that it is. As we "stand before" the broken needle in a "helpless way," we "uncover" it as "present-at-hand," a mere thing extended in space (103/73). Thus, in contrast to traditional ontology, Heidegger sees the experience of entities as present-at-hand as being abnormal. For the most part, we experience entities in terms of their utility and availability. Only in a breakdown, when they become useless and unavailable, do we experience them as present-at-hand things. Theoretical behavior strays in taking this as the primary way we encounter entities in the world. It is only when equipment confronts us in its failure that we experience the world apart from us.

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"Self-portrait" by Kati Reus

Acknowledgements

Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College extends special thanks to:

Dr. Mary Graham
Dr. Tammy Franks
Dr. Cedric Bradley
Dr. Jonathan Woodward
Dr. Suzi Brown
Dr. Ladd Taylor
Bobby Ghosal
Robin Lyons
Dr. Vernon LaCour
Dr. Jordan Sanderson
MGCCC-Jackson County Language Arts Department
MGCCC-Jefferson Davis Language Arts Department
MGCCC-Perkinston Language Arts Department



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