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ART OF DARKNESS

by
Sarah Catherine Roper

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford
May,
2020

Approved by

Advisor: Professor Virginia Rougon Chavis

Reader: Dr. Kris Belden-Adams

Reader: Dr. John Samonds

DEDICATION

Dedicated to those who dream while walking, and rest without sleep.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To My Advisor:

Thank you to Virginia Chavis, for your help, patience, and belief in me. You are Art Mom, and you are very much loved.

To My Professors:

Thank you to Kris Belden-Adams, Louise Arizzoli, Nancy Wicker, Lauren Cardenas, and Tyler Barnes.

To My Colleagues:

Thank you to everyone who works in the office of the Department of Art & Art History, the College of Liberal Arts, the staff of University Marketing & Communications, and the connections I have made through my time at Itawamba Community College, for helping me succeed in this field, and providing glorious entertainment. I appreciate all of you.

To My Friends:

Thank you for being close with me and pushing me to do my best, particularly giving some shout-outs to Kaitlyn Brewer, Anna Breland, Ashton Keen, Eli Morgan, Tony McElveen, and Penny Hyland. Y'all are awesome.

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the process, production, and explanation of *Art of Darkness*, an artistic expression of the struggle with anxiety. All of the work is inspired by literature and art from the English Romantic and Victorian eras, and focuses on quotes about the mind, emotions, and other thought processes. As each piece highlights a different aspect of anxiety, it also portrays the struggles of anxiety through color palette, printing process, and symbolism. These printed pieces consist of letter-press printed materials, with ink-wiped backgrounds and hand-stitched details. Also included are large-scale prints with silkscreened foregrounds, a selection of bookmarks, a small edition of chap-book/journals, and enamel pins. The work is meant to be viewed by individuals who suffer with anxiety, and provide a relationship between the text and the viewer based on the contents of the quote.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Art of Darkness is an expression of what it is like to live in your own head, using various graphic-design media. Each piece features a quote from English Romantic or Victorian literature, and/or inspiration from Spanish Romantic prints that concentrates on the human thought process and its revelations. Through a series of hand printed pieces, the posters, books and bookmarks were created using traditional letterpress processes. Contemporary digital design work was also utilized. The nature of the handprinted pieces give the viewer the sense of the hands-on process and the touch that was left behind. This work invites those who suffer with anxiety to find a silver lining within the work, that relates to their own struggles.

Art of Darkness portrays the beauty within the struggle of living with anxiety. There are times when the darkness of our thoughts can consume us. The art and literature of the Romantics and Victorians provided endless journeys through the mind-scape of humankind, and glorification of melancholy as an art form, expressing mental restlessness in a different light. It can be exhausting to try to see the good in something so consuming, but there is a beauty to it all, a gold outline to the darkness that sometimes can consume our minds. Through the use of various graphic design and letterpress media, the work aspires to portray a beauty in the struggles of the viewers.

RATIONALE

I have always enjoyed horror stories. The *Goosebumps* series is where my love for the macabre began. At eight years old, I could read one of those books in about an hour. I read them swinging; I read them on car rides. I was down for a good scary story. As I got older, the *Goosebumps* series turned into the Brothers Grimm, then to a collection of Edgar Allan Poe's work. While taking British Literature II, and art history of the Romantic & Victorian period in college, I discovered a passion for two certain areas of art and literature that appealed to my enjoyments; educational stimuli, and personal struggles.

Growing up in (what seems to be) the middle of nowhere in Mississippi provided me with two very important things: a love and a respect for nature, and a sense of independence. I could live outside if I had to, and I pretty much did. I would run along the hunting trails outside of my house at least once a week, all eight miles of them, with just two dogs and a cat for companionship. Going barefoot absolutely everywhere, I would feel the fallen blooms of wildflowers under my feet, and I'd leave prints in the sand of the nearby drainage ditch that flowed from the pond. I repeatedly tried to catch bunnies, and repeatedly failed. The breeze would rustle the mimosa trees and their pink bursts of flowers would flow through the air, and the leaves would rustle in waves of soft sound, leaving fragmented shadows on the tall creek grass. In air laden with the smell of grass after the rain, my mind will wander to happier places.

I did most of my younger wandering alone. I was the only kid on the street until my little

sister came along, and even then, our age gap did not allow for companionship. I grew up in my own headspace, and always was calculated when around other people. Today, I still have some uncertainty with others. I had friends at school, but being relatively quiet and already a bit socially awkward, I found more comfort with my pets, books, and flowers than with playdates and birthday parties. I always understood that I thought a little differently than others, but I would not realize how extreme that difference was until later.

Through the stress of college, anxiety became an uncontrollable factor of my life. Strength was regained, and towards the end of my Sophomore year was robbed from me. At the age of 18 I suffered from a concussion and lost my personality, my confidence, and my memory. There is not much of me that I can remember before the concussion that does not seem like fleeting glances. I wonder if the memories I have now are just things my imagination has created because I cannot fully comprehend or accept losing parts of my life or myself.

The ability to create was always there, yet my subject leaned towards darker things: colors, personas, stories. Mentally, I am haunted by the loss of myself, the ever-present ghosts of doubt. This is what it is like to live with Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and Acute Major Depressive Disorder (plus a little bit of brain damage). Sometimes, it is a living nightmare. As someone who suffers from chronic mental illness, I have started to embrace my mind as not disordered, but a piece of me. Considering that a little over 18 percent of the United States of America's population is afflicted with a diagnosed anxiety disorder, none of us are truly alone in this battle, even though stigma

surrounding mental illness can make us feel alone.¹ Even though living with anxiety can feel damning at times, it makes us who we are. Each story, each worry, each fear, makes us each unique.

The English Romantic and Victorian authors' expressions of restlessness through creativity is empowering, and fascinating. I empathize with the Romantics' views of melancholy, sensory overload, and disorientation in an industrialized world. They believed that nature was an essential part of their beings, and lamented that humans had drifted into a selfish state. For the English Romantic authors, such as William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Blake, "truth" sometimes was found in the daffodils, in the sea, in the cold breezes of an early spring morning, and in their daydreams.

Spirituality, for some, was held in higher esteem than rationality. Dwelling in melancholy worked to an artist's advantage; consider the work of Wordsworth. Orphaned at thirteen, his emotional output became poetry for the majority of his early life; as he grew older, he pursued failed political ventures, unhealthy relationships, and the death of some of his children. All of these events drove his major poetical works, making him the poet Laureate of England and a father of the Romantic movement in literature.² Authors such as Joseph Conrad, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Christina Rossetti were the Victorian era, diving into the realms of psychological terror, relying on the irrational undertows of our minds that can spiral out of

1 "Facts & Statistics", Anxiety and Depression Association of America, ADAA, accessed March 12, 2020, <https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>.

2 Deidra Shauna Lynch, "William Wordsworth," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2018), 280-282.

control. In literature, Victorian stories are the fuel of nightmares, ranging from harrowing tales of split personalities to extreme cases of what happens to your mind if you get lost in the jungle and let nature consume you. I am entranced by nature's peace amid the splintered rays of light hitting the purple clover, letting the buzz of the bees wash over the ringing in my ears. Yet I am in a constant state of psychological turmoil, on a quest through nightmares, to find pieces of me I have left behind.

Artists from both of these eras produced work that reveled in the concentration of the mind and its wonders. By borrowing texts from them that celebrate the uniqueness of our thoughts, *Art of Darkness* explores the sensations of coping with mental-health issues at a time of high anxiety. While literature is one of the main components of this exhibition, *Art of Darkness* also engages various graphic design and letterpress processes, the strategic use of color, and compelling imagery to portray the anxieties that haunt many of us. The design work in this exhibition aspires to help viewers acknowledge the beauty of their own inner struggles.

PROCESS

Letterpress printing is meant to be repetitive, uniform, and include editions of the design. It is typically expected that each print is clean and identically resembles one another in a collection. While I appreciate this formal quality, I am also intrigued by the idea of experimenting to make prints that are also one of a kind. The ink-wipe process allows for a uniqueness in each print that is not obtained with formal letterpress printing processes. With the ink-wipe process, each print is unique. While some aspects can be controlled such as color and amount of ink coverage, the pattern of the ink on the paper is almost spontaneous. The final prints appear much like abstract watercolor paintings, that evolve as more ink and solvent is applied with each sheet of paper going through the printing press.

I learned the ink-wipe process from a visiting artist demonstration the department held in February 2019. Chris Fritton, otherwise known as the Itinerant Printer, is a contemporary letterpress artist working in Buffalo, New York. Fritton travels the United States giving demonstrations, attending workshops, and showcasing his self-proclaimed style of consolidation: the ink-wipe method. His method is unique because it began as a cleaning process. Considering that there are four separate rollers and one large drum that require cleaning, the cleaning process can become time-consuming and wasteful, especially when using fabrics or shop rags for it. Fritton's ink-wipe method is an ingenious way to consolidate cleaning solutions, and create beautiful, abstracted backgrounds for new pieces. After letting ink run through the press, mineral spirits (a cleaning agent) is applied through

a spray bottle on the top two rollers. As the spirits cycle through the rollers and drum, they are slowed by the casual stripping of ink, until the top four rollers completely stop, leaving only the main drum running. As the mineral spirits clean ink from the rollers, each pull of the paper allows it to collect different amounts of color, leaving behind less with each print. This creates patterns, such as layers of splashes and streaks that create a sense of depth and imperfection for each piece. Residual ink spots, after they are stripped so many times, create a static effect on paper, reminiscent of analog television sets when the channel gets switched. The final prints are abstract in composition, and appear to be a collection of ink stains, varying in value and form. While Fritton's work is vividly colored and includes multiple layers, my prints only contain one to two layers and have a more serious color palette to fit with the rest of my thesis work. I borrowed his idea of creating backgrounds via this process in order to have elements in my pieces that created depth, and could have a representational meaning.

What this process creates is a metaphor for restless thoughts and individuality. Each ink-wipe printed piece showcases a unique mark, one that can never be made twice. As a person, we all are different from one another, and we all fight our own battles. Each pull of ink is a reminder that our differences and battles create us. The darkest stains are our most recent struggles, which are never quite the same as someone else's.

The ink-wipe technique creates a dimensional background for a bookmark, as in *Clare's Mark*. In *Clare's Mark*, values range from dark to light. As the wipe loses more ink, the static areas appear, like lines on an analog television screen. The static refers to an

overactive headspace. With a head always swirling, even in dead silence, the ringing in the ears to the uncontrollable voices in the head, it feels just like a vintage television set: static. Bookmark 1 contains a quote by John Clare, a Romantic poet, from his piece “I Am”. These lines from the poem discuss a longing for peace and a push back to nature, away from the frivolity of man and the troubles of everyday life. As someone with anxiety longs for inner peace, Clare presents it here in poetic form.



Clare's Mark, 2020, ink on paper, letterpress process, 2" x 6",
Oxford, Mississippi.

The typesetting and typeface of all the bookmarks, as seen in later images, are the same. Garamond, an original letterpress lead-type, is used throughout, and the placement of the text is the top-left corner, left adjusted, to read as the original poetry does. As the poetry fills one side of the bookmarks, the ink-wipe fills the other, giving a design element to blank space, and portraying a restless, unique energy in art form.



Conrad's Mark I, 2020, ink on paper, letterpress process, 2" x 6",
Oxford, Mississippi.

STITCHING

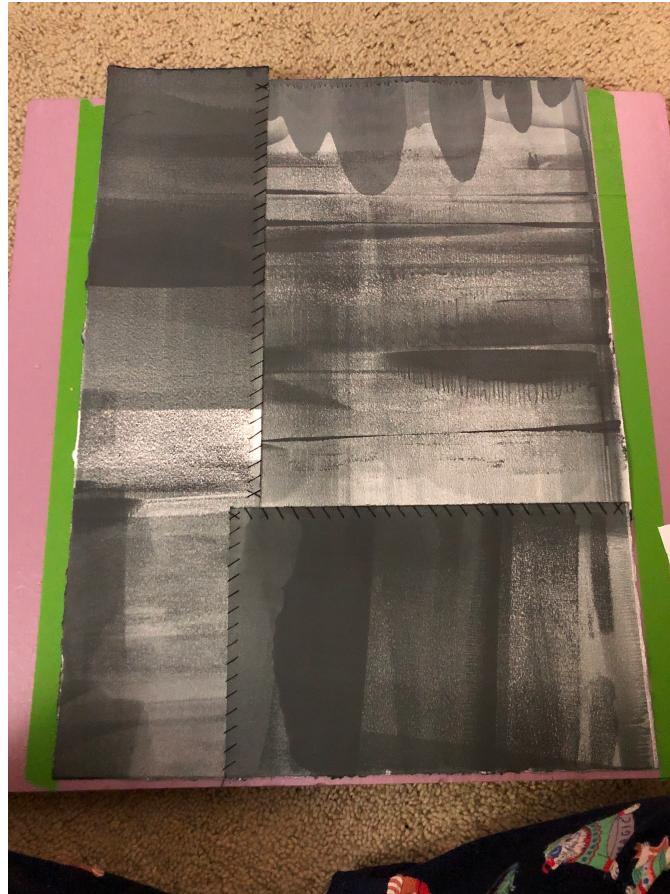
I first got the idea of using stitched prints while attending Virginia Chavis's *Sense of Place* exhibition in November of 2019 at Southside Gallery, Oxford, Mississippi. The stitching in her work overall, adds texture and rhythm, while also showcasing a multiprocess piece. In relation to the content, the stitching represents the act of individuals coming together and being bound to where they are from.

By using stitching on the large, 18" x 24" prints, such as *Conrad's Piece*, I am able to connect the ink wipes and stitching to imply a union of the hand-made with the mechanical. Ripping, inking, and stitching paper together, makes the mechanical process seem so little, almost unnoticed, just like some of the pain we hide from the rest of the world. The physical process, while stress-relieving, is also representative of how we handle our emotions after something traumatic happens to us, which can either alleviate, or heighten, the anxieties we already suffer from on a daily basis.

After ink-wiping ripped pieces of Reaves BFK (printmaking paper), I began my stitching process. I used Reaves because of its durability; it is a thick, cotton paper that holds its shape under added stress. Stitching could rip through a thin paper, and the prints needed to hold up to the silk-screen foreground that was to be applied to them. Layering the paper onto each other and creating an angled stitch, having to go through each half-inch of paper and poke the individual needle holes, and pulling the separate pieces together to become one, represent the

emotional and physical ability we partake in order to move past hardships in our lives—things that cause anxieties.

After a traumatic experience we are expected to pull ourselves together and go back to our normal lives. There are times when we all must act strong for our family, partners, and friends, in order to keep life moving. There is no set time for healing. Our scars may remain for years, embedding our pain into our personalities, actions, and lives. It takes strength to pull oneself back together.



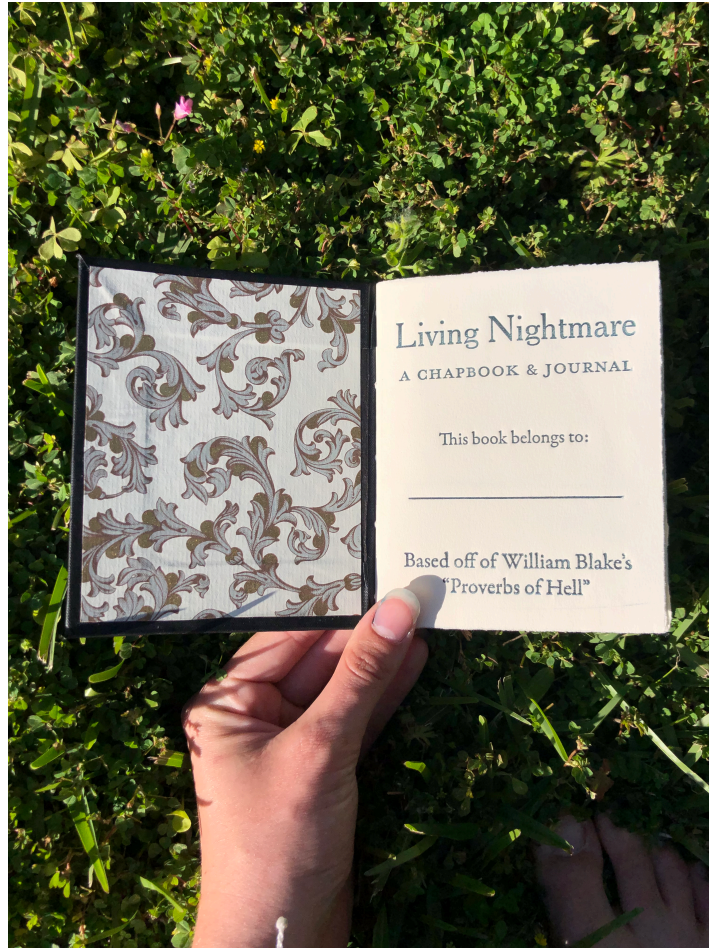
Conrad's Piece [incomplete], 2020, ink-wipe & stitched paper, 18" x 24",
Oxford & Tupelo, Mississippi.

In *Conrad's Piece*, the print's stitched background was to hold a quote from *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, stating, "The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future". Sadly, this full print, and three similar others with separate quotes, were not able to be produced, as well as the interior of my chapbooks, due to the current situation involving Coronavirus. *Living Nightmare* is a small collection of lines from William Blake's "Proverbs of Hell", turned into a hardbound journal.

The idea behind these chapbooks plus journals was to create a place for the daily stresses of life to be written out and kept away, something that I have learned has helped me through the years. While they were not able to be completed due to the current pandemic, the insides of every right, front facing page would have held a quote from the "Proverbs of Hell", which was an extensive list of short reminders about the basic ethics of everyday life. Having small reminders of certain actions or emotions can keep the mind at ease when the little things can seem bothersome.

These little books are held together by one string of waxed thread, holding together sixteen pages of Sumatran book paper and two cloth covered, bound book board covers. Without proper bookmaking tools, one large fabric sewing needle did the majority of the work, burrowing holes into the paper and cover, making enough room for a five hole pamphlet stitch to be thread through. The amount of work that went into making this book, and the small amount of supplies I was able to work with from home, showcases the strength that the binding has in this work.

3 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), 94.



Living Nightmare II, 2020, interior front page, book-arts, 4" x 5",
Tupelo, Mississippi.

The stitching is a reminder of our strength, of our scars. They hold us together, just like the threads hold the pieces of torn paper. They accentuate the rest of the piece, adding movement and rhythm and visual interest, and guiding the viewer around the print. While our scars all may or may not be visible, they are pieces of us that we have left or saved from harrowing experiences, and they will keep us together, showcasing our endurance.

COLOR PALETTE

Black, gold, and gray have been signature colors for me since my second semester at the University of Mississippi. My work shifted to darker shades after the concussion. Each of these colors has a specific meaning. Black requires immediate respect and attention. To some, it can appear suffocating or panic inducing, especially for people who are scared of the dark. Black also is the absence of color. According to the laws of physics, black is not a part of the visible spectrum.⁴ In an offset or digital printer, black is depicted as the key tone, and is not accounted as a color. The hexadecimal value of black is #000000, placing it on the very edge of the swatch palette. All of these components portray the true uniqueness of black, and that uniqueness has left the color up for interpretation across time. Black also is the color of grief, evil, fear, death, and mystery. Funeral attire, super villains, and Lucifer himself all have been represented by the color black. On the other hand, black has been embraced as a symbol of respect and ambition. Elegance is wearing a black dress, and empires were built on the backs of black uniforms, representing uniformity and discipline. Black, of all things, has become a metaphor for anything under the human condition that can be deemed fit. It is the absence of, the rise to, the past, the present, or the future, the good, and the bad. Most people say that white is the only color to allow a space to be completely open, but with a white room, you can still see the corners, the shadows, the confined space you are in. With black, the edges and shadows gradually disappear, until you step into a space that can be as vast as the night sky.

⁴ Glenn Elert, *The Physics Hypertextbook* (1998-2020), Discussion of Color, <https://physics.info/color/>.

Looking at *Smith's Mark*, the presence of black surrounds the gold, like a void containing a hidden treasure. The black of the bookmark is powerful; it can go on endlessly, swallowing all value. Black here is representative of the feelings of anxiety, always present, demanding to be seen. As it supports the gold text beautifully, it references the lurking thoughts of one's restless mind, just as it boosts the text of this poem. As Smith longs for sleep, her mind does



Smith's Mark, 2020, ink on paper, letterpress process, 2" x 6",
Oxford, Mississippi.

not allow it, creating a cycle of insomnia that sufferers of anxiety can find hard to break from. Black is used as an association with mental struggle, and a comfort can be found in this association, understanding that this darkness is a part of struggle and it requires respect, even if

it is not always a symbiotic relationship. It is not the dark that people should fear, but what's in it. Black is not suffocating, it is not evil. It is a sensation, everything or anything that a person cannot understand, placed before them, as an immeasurable quality of time and space.

Gold is a precious metal, one of the most sought-after on Earth. The awe that surrounds it has been noted for centuries. It has been used as ancient coinage, fine jewelry, and delicate pieces of decoration. It is regarded with achievements and wisdom, and smothered in tradition, giving it connotations with grandeur and comfortability. The divine are sometimes cloaked in it, and it has an illuminating brilliance and warmth to it. Gold is a stubborn color, it is unmoving, and has kept its connotations throughout time. It is the color of the late afternoon sun as it hits the leaves of the oak trees and the swaying dandelions in my backyard, illuminating the wood bees on their path for pollen. It lines the clouds in a dazzling display of rays, shooting out into the open atmosphere and projecting into space. It sparkles on blonde hair and whiskers, igniting both in the wind. It is a token of a personal *memento mori*, beautiful and lethal.

Goldenrod is a seasonal weed, and something that I've been deemed extremely allergic to. It's the flower that sprouts from the signature "R" on my wax seal. I created this seal as a separate piece of work for the exhibition, but also as a signature piece for myself. Wax seals were prominent in former centuries, used until the early twentieth century as a mark of important documentation or invitation.¹ While my better judgement keeps me from picking it off the side

⁵ "The History and Resurgence of Wax Seals," Stamps Direct, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.stampsdirect.co.uk/blog/2013/08/02/the-history-and-resurgence-of-wax-seals/>.

of the road, it is awfully pretty to look at, flowing in the fall breeze, proudly displaying its tall spirals of golden annihilation; a beauty in darkness. It is organic, but still so strong.

Gold ink has a metallic glint that catches the eye. Particles of color shine in wet ink like the rays of the sun bouncing off of light-colored eyes. The immediate attention brought by this color draws in the individual, illuminating a piece in stature and grandeur. Its beauty is



Wax Seal, 2020, wax and tassel on ink-wipe paper, 1.75",
Tupelo, Mississippi.

representational of our endurance and strength. Layered over black, it creates an immediate contrast and depth in the space of the work. It gives a beauty to the darkness, a sublime creation. We as human beings are haunted all of our lives by internal and external suffering,

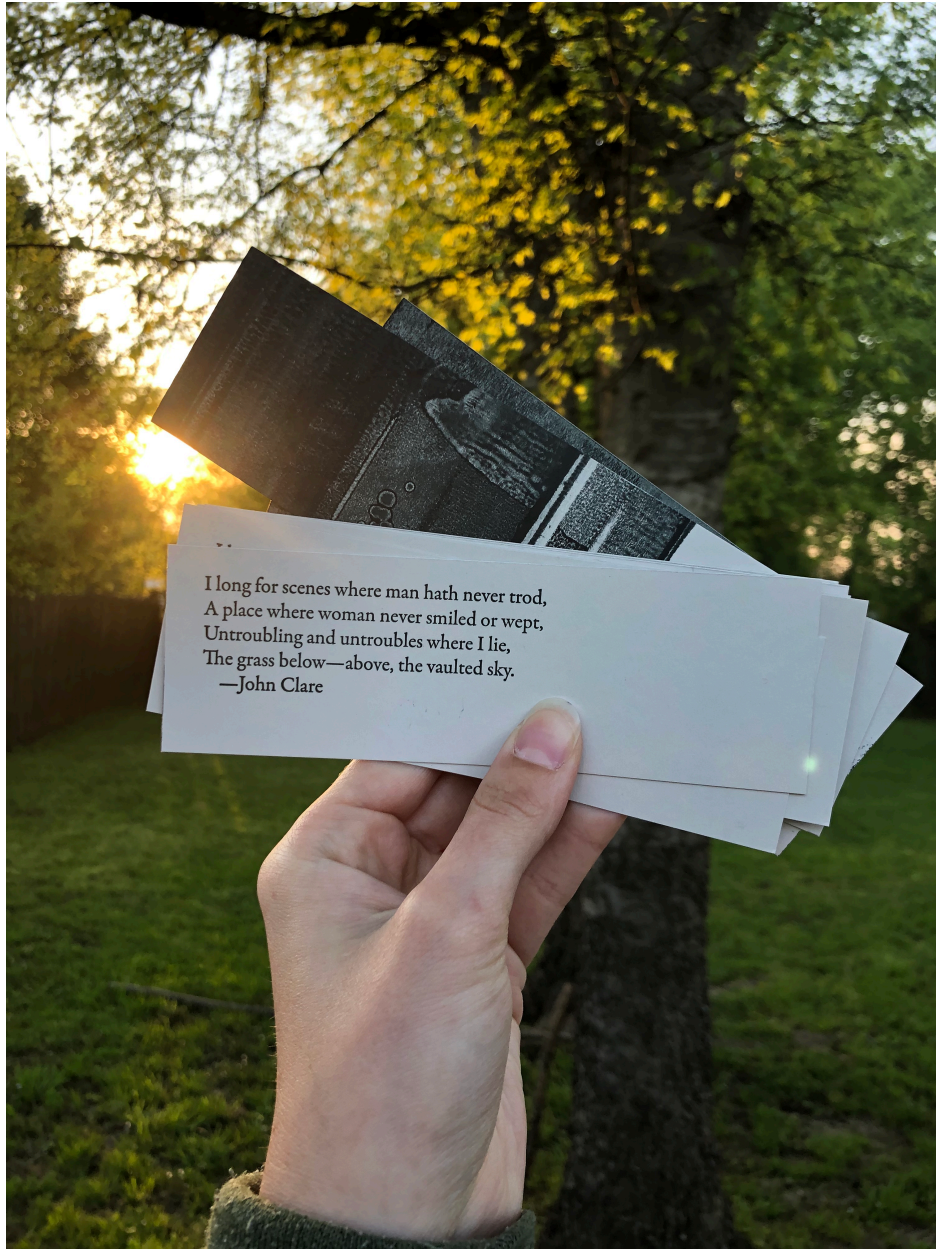
leaving scars that remain as constant reminders of our endurance. Our darkness should be recognized; we live through and with it. What better way than to outline our darkest moments with a golden ray, just like the sun shining into our soul after days of rain.

Gray is an anomaly in the color spectrum. Caught between the shade of black and tint of white, it is straddling the line between a color and a tone. The definition of the color is, “. . .as of ashes or lead”.⁶ It is nonconformist, and can float between the realms of alienation, industrialism, and relaxation. It remains distant to us, untouchable and unmoving. It is associated with the mature, showing a strong sense of intellect and dependability for those who rely on it most. It is an undeniable notion of the direct effects of time on us as people. It wanders through the scale of black and white, and leaves no real response to change, or emotions. Gray has no real control over the human psyche, and can become a calm, or restless, space.

There is an unwavering truth in the color gray. It shows us an unaltered nature. On rainy days, there is no dazzling sunlight to make the world appear brighter. Every color you see is in its true hue. Soft light touches the leaves of the kudzu and bluegrass, and the only sparkles of light come from drops of moisture collected by falling mist. The world seems slow, standing on its axis for what seems like an eternity even if only for a few hours. Moist, cool air hits the back of the throat with a sensation like menthol and tea tree oil, and a heaviness comes over damp skin.

⁶ *New Oxford-American Dictionary*, s.v. “Gray,” last modified 2015, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/grey>.

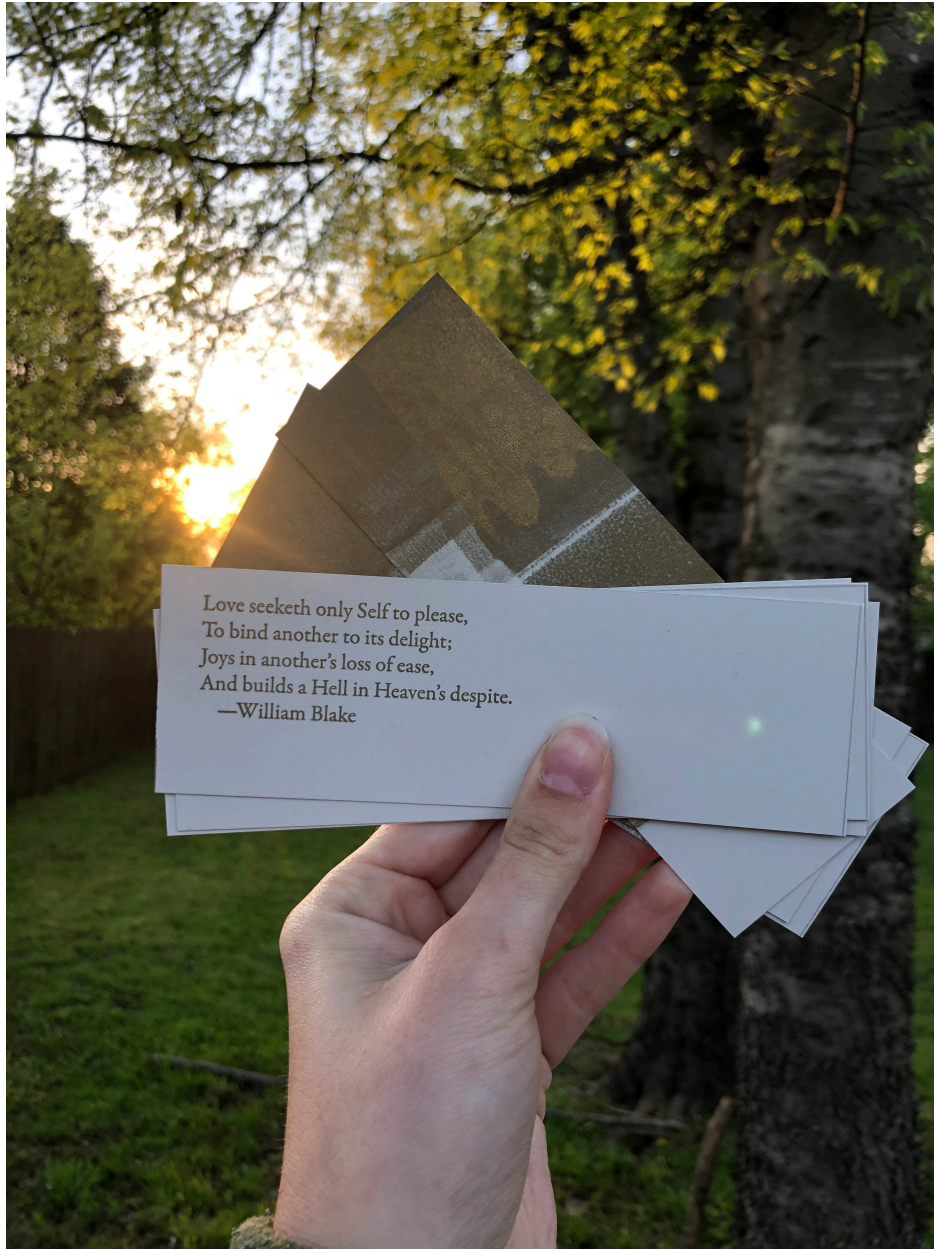
Looking back to *Conrad's Piece*, the ink-wipe can be seen in varying values, from black to dark gray to a light, foggy gray. Looking into the different washes of this color allows the viewer to get lost in the print, finding separate marks and values in every inch. It is an area of wonder, rest, and unsettlement, all in one. Water drips from the crown of the forehead to the tip of the nose, until gravity pulls it down to the wet earth, and then you question why you've been standing in the rain, staring into the distant mists; what exactly were you thinking about? Gray is a place we have all been to, as we search for peace in the very few moments that we are allowed them. In my work, I want to present this color as an area of space for the viewer to be able to escape and step back, just like how we get lost in our thoughts on a rainy day, losing track of time, doing the one thing we instinctively know how to do: breathe.



Clare's Mark, 2020, ink on paper, 2" x 6", letterpress process, Oxford, Mississippi.



Smith's Mark, 2020, ink on paper, 2" x 6", letterpress process, Oxford, Mississippi.



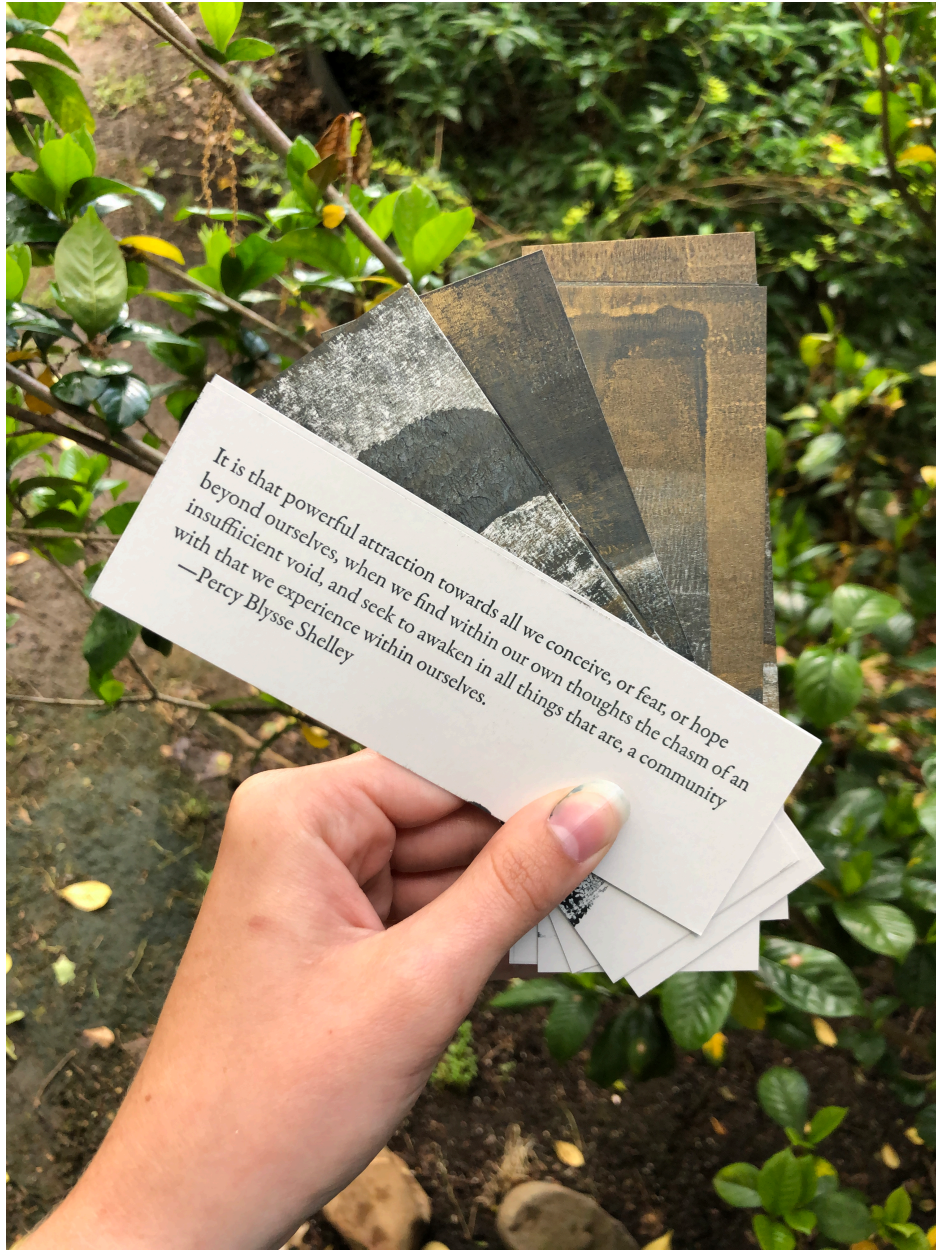
Blake's Mark, 2020, ink on paper, 2" x 6", letterpress process, Oxford, Mississippi.



Shelley's Mark I, 2020, ink on paper, 2" x 6", letterpress process, Oxford, Mississippi.



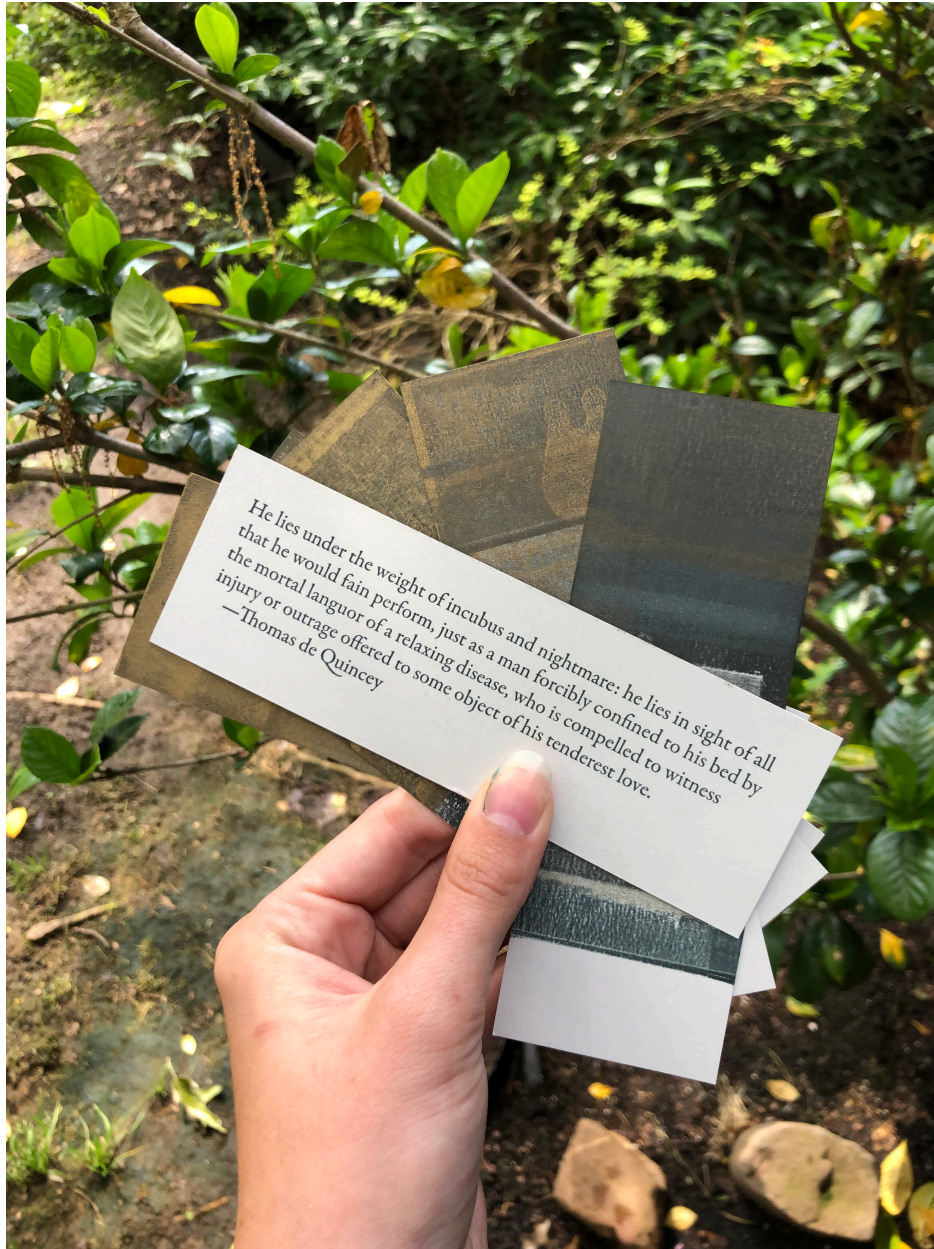
Byron's Mark, 2020, ink on paper, 2" x 6", letterpress process, Oxford, Mississippi.



Shelley's Mark II, 2020, ink on paper, 2" x 6", letterpress process, Oxford, Mississippi.



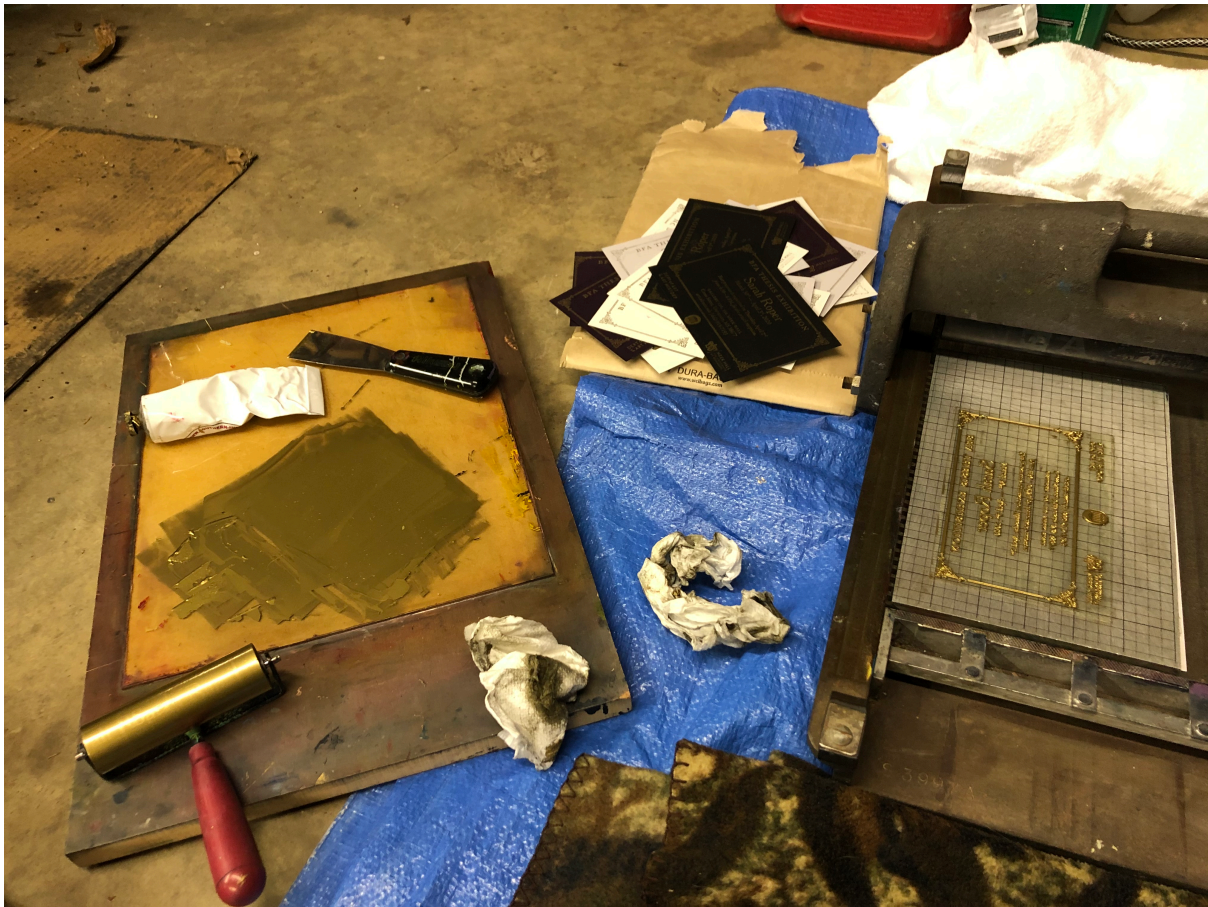
Conrad's Mark I, 2020, ink on paper, 2" x 6", letterpress process, Oxford, Mississippi.



Quincey's Mark, 2020, ink on paper, 2" x 6", letterpress process, Oxford, Mississippi.



Conrad's Mark II, 2020, ink on paper, 2" x 6", letterpress process, Oxford, Mississippi.



Invitation Printing Process, 2020, letterpress process, Tupelo, Mississippi.



Invitation I, 2020, front side, ink on paper, 6" x 4", letterpress process, Tupelo, Mississippi.



Invitation II, back side, 2020, ink on paper, 6" x 4", letterpress process, Tupelo, Mississippi.



Wax Stamp I, 2020, bronze & gold plated stamp, Tupelo, Mississippi.



Wax Stamp II, 2020, bronze & gold plated stamp, Tupelo, Mississippi.



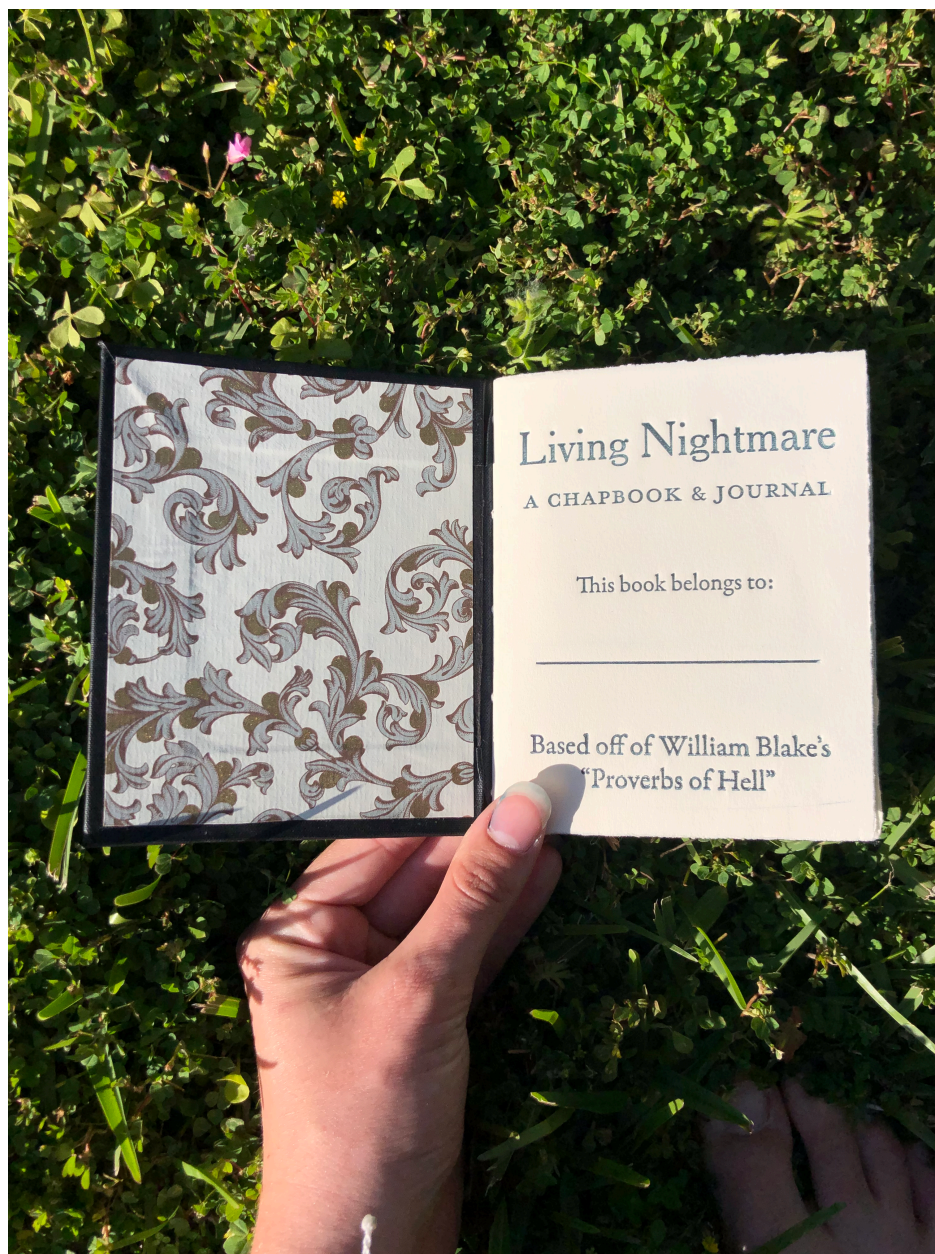
Wax Sealing Process, 2020, Tupelo, Mississippi.



Wax Seal, 2020, wax and tassel on ink-wipe paper, 1.75", Tupelo, Mississippi.



Living Nightmare I, 2020, exterior cover, book-arts, 4" x 5", Tupelo, Mississippi.



Living Nightmare II, 2020, interior front page, book-arts, 4" x 5", Tupelo, Mississippi.



Living Nightmare III, 2020, interior pages, book-arts, 4" x 5", Tupelo, Mississippi.



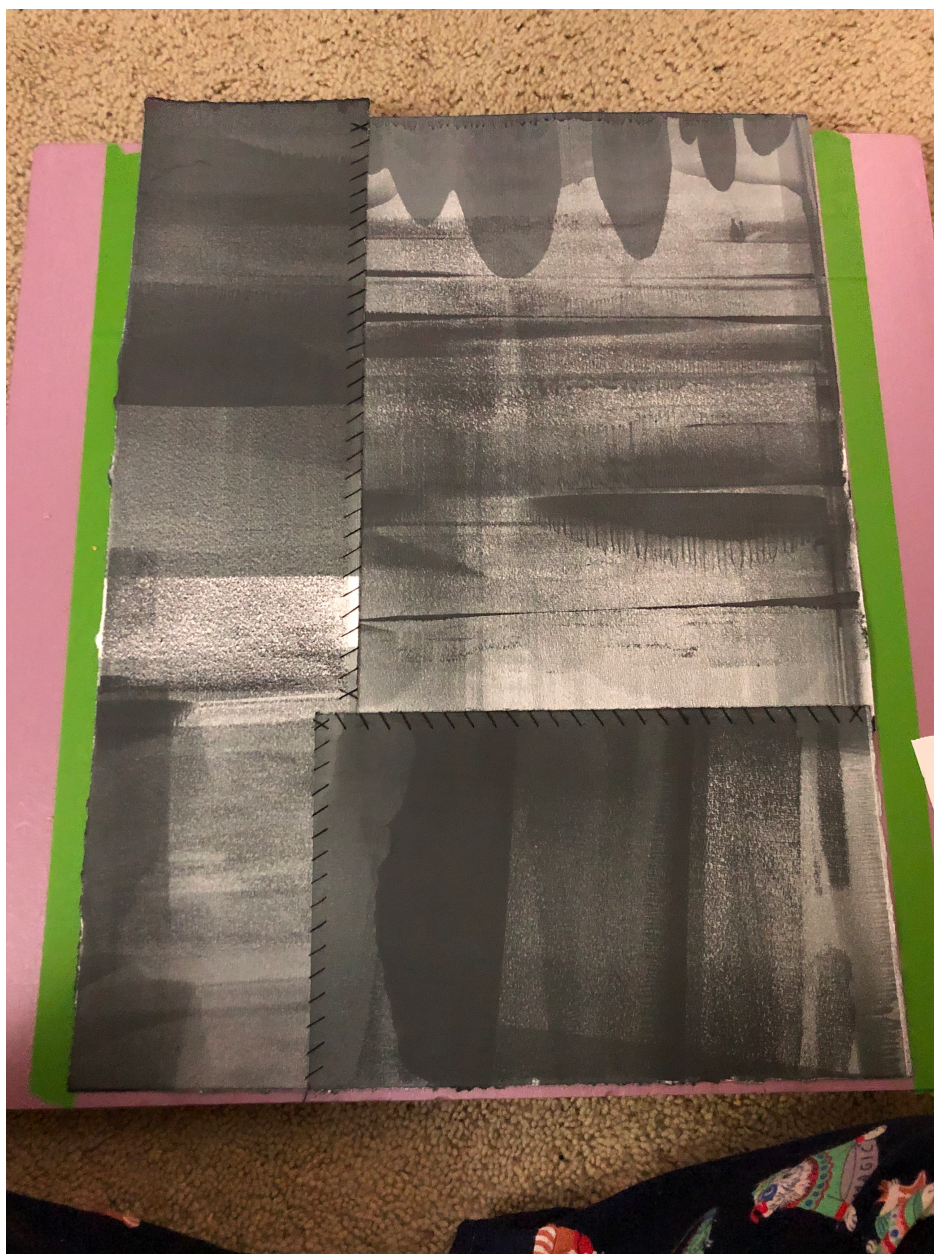
Living Nightmare IV, 2020, exterior binding, book-arts, 4" x 5", Tupelo, Mississippi.



Monogram Pins I, 2020, front-face, soft enamel & nickel plate, 1.25", Tupelo, Mississippi.



Monogram Pins II, 2020, soft enamel & nickel plate, 1.25", Tupelo, Mississippi.



Conrad's Piece [incomplete], 2020, ink-wipe & stitched paper, 18" x 24",
Oxford & Tupelo, Mississippi.

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