

Lost and Found: Love Letters to the Land

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Painting Department

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Dedication

This is also a letter of love to my mother, Sandra; my little brother, Josh; my father, Larry; and all the other family members whose absence has shaped me, and whose memory and spirit guide my work.

And to my three children, who are my hope and heart.

Acknowledgements

To my family- My deepest and most heartfelt gratitude for the support and love you have given. Thank you for walking with me on this journey.

I also want to thank the professors and the community of students at SCAD for a lifetime of wisdom and inspiration packed into the last four years.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	1
Abstract	2
Introduction	4
I. The Present	7
II. The Past	26
III. The Dream	36
IV. Conclusion	46
Appendix	48
Bibliography	62

List of Figures

Figure	Title	Page
Figure 1.	<i>What Carries You</i>	8
Figure 2.	<i>What Carries You</i> , detail	11
Figure 3.	<i>Tree Roots</i> , Van Gogh	12
Figure 4.	<i>Passage</i>	15
Figure 5.	<i>Forgiven</i>	18
Figure 6.	<i>Received</i>	20
Figure 7.	<i>White Band No. 27</i> , Mark Rothko	22
Figure 8.	<i>Lost and Found</i>	24
Figure 9.	<i>Ordovician Sea No. 11</i>	28
Figure 10.	<i>Memories of the Ordovician Sea</i>	29
Figure 11.	<i>Memories of the Ordovician Sea</i> installation view	30
Figure 12.	<i>Receding Waters (300 Million Years) No. 2</i>	32
Figure 13.	<i>Ordovician Sea No. 2</i>	34
Figure 14.	<i>Pieces of a Dream</i>	38

Figure 15.	<i>Pieces of a Dream detail</i>	39
Figure 16	<i>Thresholds</i>	41
Figure 17	<i>Thresholds (detail)</i>	41
Figure 18	<i>To Follow the Course of the Brook</i>	44

Abstract

Lost and Found: Love Letters to the Land

Hannah Rowell

May 2026

Hannah Rowell's M.F.A. Thesis exhibition, "Lost and Found: Love Letters to the Land" is a call to cultivate reciprocal care with the living, breathing landscape. Weaving ecological interdependence with personal healing, her drawings, paintings, and installations reflect a longstanding relationship with Bear Creek in Middle Tennessee. Through large-scale charcoal drawings, she creates intimate vignettes grounded in the present moment. Elemental ink abstractions, shaped by fluid movement and chance, reference geological time and emergence, expanding the narrative into the deep history of the land. Mixed-media installations incorporating paintings with found stones and driftwood disrupt linear time and reflect the liminal, dream-like space where memory, history, and imagination converge.

Across the media, Rowell traces parallels between personal grief and ecological fragility, revealing cycles of erosion, resilience, and renewal. The work becomes an act of remembrance, a love letter to the land - a testament to healing with and through the land. Hannah Rowell's M.F.A. thesis exhibition, "Lost and Found: Love Letters to the Land", was held at Nashville State Community College, in Nashville, Tennessee, from May 15- July 15, 2026.

Keywords: time; landscape; personal grief; healing; ecological interdependence; Tennessee; childhood; memories; deep time.

Introduction

The primroses were over. Toward the edge of the wood, where the ground became open and sloped down to an old fence and a brambly ditch beyond, only a few fading patches of pale yellow still showed among the dog's mercury and oak-tree roots.

-*Watership Down*, Richard Adams.

Even in the face of loss, the land carries on in its own rhythms. Things bloom, pass, and return, regardless of human activity and interference. The cycles of the earth become like beacons of hope in a world that needs to remember.

The creeks and rivers of the earth are like veins that carry the lifeblood of the land, as well as stories, histories, and remnants of the past. Along the creekbank, my children and I find hints of other lives the water has touched: a little girl's leather shoe from the 1960's, a snapping turtle moving silently beneath the current, fragments of coral from an ancient sea, a fossilized bison tooth, Native American artifacts, a deer skull, and even a wedding ring just my size, as if placed for me by the current itself. Nothing is lost forever. The water offers both history and mystery.

Water moves in cycles, rising and falling, shaping land and life. My own experiences mirror this rhythm; hopes and fears are destroyed and rebuilt over time. As I stand in the gentle current of Bear Creek after a rain, watching the light dance across the surface, I also see the blue-green depths in the distance and hear the echo of the kingfisher above. I know

that next week could bring the creek to a flood stage with mud and fallen trees sweeping away everything in its path.

But renewal is a constant, and life endures. I run my fingers along the smooth roots of the trees that shade and shelter along the bank of the creek. These roots, usually growing and moving underground inch by inch, here are unveiled by erosion, reminders of perseverance, connection, and resilience.

In my M.F.A. thesis body of work, “Lost and Found: Love Letters to the Land,” sky, roots, and stones speak to the reciprocal relationship we can have with nature. For twenty-two years, I have lived on Bear Creek in Bon Aqua, Tennessee – a place I chose so that I could raise my children in the same way that I grew up, surrounded by the sound of moving water and a chorus of crickets, frogs, and whip-poor-wills on a summer night. Through drawing, painting, and installation, I am creating a love letter to this land, acknowledging both its healing power and unyielding force. I’ve learned that, like the earth, things within us are being destroyed and rebuilt all the time. This is the healing the land provides, and my work is an acknowledgment of the ancient understanding that is woven through the sky, earth, and water: as above, so below.

The drawings, paintings, and installations in this body of work explore the parallel rhythms between self and environment. This work tells a story about the land that I love, but this could be anyone's story, because the land belongs to all of us, and we belong to the land.

“Lost and Found: Love Letters to the Land” marks the convergence of three realms-*The*

Present, The Past, and The Dream. Time itself is a mystery, and this work is an observation and an offering to the mystery of this place. *The Present* embodies the state of the living, breathing land in this moment as I witness it, *The Past* calls to the ancient history of the land- the memory it holds of deep time. *The Dream* taps into the liminal space where we experience timelessness and the numinous.

Part I: The Present

And together they slipped away, running easily down through the wood, where the first primroses were beginning to bloom.

-*Watership Down*, Richard Adams



Figure 1. Hannah Rowell, *What Carries You*, 2026, charcoal on paper, 60" x 48"

On the land where I live, I have come to feel the sacred in the constant refrains of nature. Morning and evening, the light finds the ridgetop across Bear Creek. In spring, the blackberry blossoms arrive in a sudden burst, in their habit of renewal. The water rises and falls through the seasons, keeping its own measure. In these repetitions something steady and quiet persists.

What Carries You (Figure 1) is a large charcoal drawing of a congregation of trees whose roots reveal a beautiful tangle of complexity. A spot along Bear Creek that I return to over and over for my own renewal.

The act of drawing some of the places along this creek has become a meditation on meaning. Drawings can be erased and wiped away with ease, altered, and transformed in the moment. They capture intense clarity, but also smudge and blur to distort and abstract, creating an emotional resemblance to dreams and the unknown.

The drawing, *What Carries You*, explores personal grief and ecological fragility through imagery of these exposed roots from the banks of Bear Creek, the large tributary of the Piney River that runs through the land where I live in Bon Aqua, Tennessee. The exposed roots remind me of the strength and purpose of the tree, even when stripped bare of the ground beneath.

The creek floods many times each year, and I've watched this beautiful root system as it holds - for now. The smooth charcoal in the dark shadows offers a stark contrast to the overexposed bark and the light, shimmering leaves. The dark areas beneath the tree form enclaves of emptiness, mirroring my own shadowed moments, and yet I find solace as the roots touch down to make contact with the clear water. There is both nourishment and sanctuary in the connection to water.

In his book, *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard explores what he calls "Intimate Immensity," a term he uses to describe the vastness we experience in the sacred spaces of nature. According to Bachelard, when we experience the immensity of the natural world, our interior world expands in response.¹ Each facet of the forest, large or small, can awaken this expansiveness in its own unique way. Here, the movement of the roots, in a rhizomatic

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Beacon Press, 1958).

dance, speaks to the complex nature of growth. There is quiet wisdom moving outward in all directions, touching clarity and mystery, light and dark.

What Carries You asks an open-ended question. What carries you - through life, through grief, through love? Water and nutrients are carried through the roots of trees. So is information. The roots of a tree carry unseen connections to family, community, preservation, health, and care.

This idea feels intuitive but also holds ecological weight. Suzanne Simard, author of *Finding the Mother Tree*, discovered that underground connections among trees are much more complex than previously known. Her studies have shown that all the trees of the forest are connected underground by fungal systems, in a way that she likens to neural pathways in the brain. In this way, the forest is one living, breathing entity. “The forest is wired for wisdom, sentience, and healing. It’s not a collection of isolated entities but a living network of relationships accumulated over centuries.”² Roots tap into a web of care protected by this complex underground life.

The three trees in this drawing stand together, roots intertwined, two Sycamores and one Beech, share a destiny. Their fates along the undercut creekbank are bound together. As patterns of rainfall intensify and floods become more powerful, stream erosion is expected to increase over the coming decades. There is a sense of loss even in the knowledge that one day, these trees whose roots have shown me the vastness that Bachelard speaks of will wash away, quite likely in my lifetime. I cannot imagine this space along the creek without

² Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2021).

these trees, but the risk of love is loss, and it is always worth the risk.

This drawing was done on a large piece of watercolor paper, with many layers of marks, like the layered experience of time spent walking along the creek and sitting in the presence of the trees. I chose a large format - while not life-sized, large enough that when I step back, I feel as if I am standing in the waters of Bear Creek. Through this drawing, I want to share the immensity that I feel here, the sense of expansiveness and the presence of this intimate spot on the creek bank.



Figure 2. Hannah Rowell, *What Carries You (detail)*, 2026, charcoal on paper, 60" x 48"

Charcoal is a versatile medium - creating the darkest, deepest shadows and light wispy, airy marks that help me capture a wide range of emotional resonance within these organic

shapes. Additionally, charcoal itself is made from burned wood; it returns to the tree through representation. This cycle reflects the movement of loss, renewal, and remembrance.

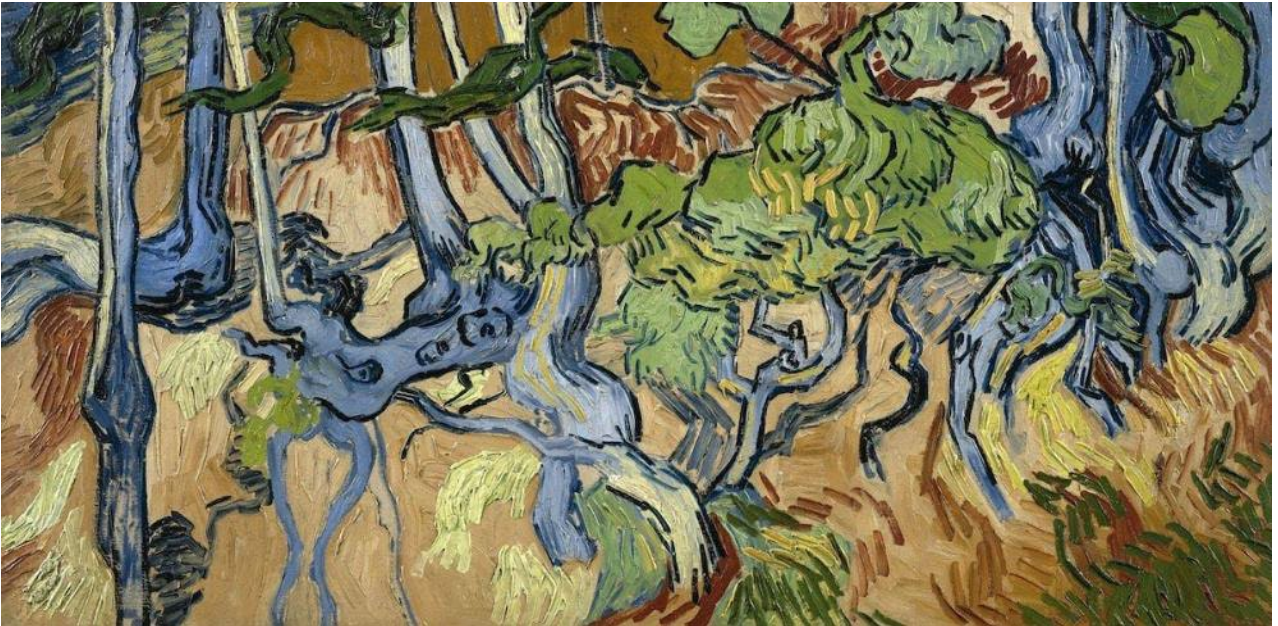


Figure 3. Vincent Van Gogh, *Tree Roots*, 1890, oil on canvas, 20" x 39"

My interest in roots as symbols of connection, resilience, and hidden relationships led me to Vincent Van Gogh's *Tree Roots*. Van Gogh reveals *Tree Roots*³ (Figure 3) laid bare, depicted in oil paints- blues, browns, and greens. This is an unusual composition- the shapes dance across the canvas, reminding us that what lies below the surface can be beautiful and complex. The artist does not focus on the tree itself, but instead, the structure that sustains the tree.

In 1890, Vincent Van Gogh studied and painted these roots along a rural road in the small village of Auvers-sur-Oise north of Paris. In the days prior to his death, he spent time in the

³ Van Gogh Museum, "Tree Roots Vincent van Gogh, 1890," n.d., www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0195V1962.

asylum at Saint-Remy. Scholars now believe that *Tree Roots* may have been his last painting.⁴

The composition draws the viewer into a labyrinth of movement. Van Gogh's brother-in-law, Andries Bonger remarked; "his final painting is a sous-bois (forest undergrowth scene), full of sun and life."⁵

Family was immensely important to Van Gogh, and his childhood experiences shaped his understanding of the natural world. His mother instilled a deep reverence for nature and equated their time on walks and working in her garden with spiritual practice. Her love for the natural world led to Van Gogh's own conclusion that "trees, especially tree roots, affirmed the promise of life after death."⁶

In my observation of roots, as in Van Gogh's painting, there is something deeply moving and mysterious about the underground life of a tree. Not all growth is visible; there are times of expansion and times for deep introspection. During these times of withdrawal, we are often sustained by connection to the ones we love. Hidden from view, roots draw nourishment, form relationships, and provide stability in times of change.

In *The Secret Language of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben explains the underground mycorrhizal networks through which signals are sent via fungal threads. "A tree can only be as strong as the forest that surrounds it."⁷ Wohlleben describes how trees often nourish a felled member of the forest, providing nutrients to the stump of the tree through these underground networks

⁴ Veen, Wouter van der. *Attacked at the Very Root, an Investigation into van Gogh's Last Days*, 2020, https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/assets/c96f40e3-bc36-4de8-906a-2b8b825074f6/Attacked-at%20the-Very-Root_Wouter-van-derVeen?c=7d3b8e9e9f5210c951011bde40f8cacb138c5cebd3e27f18083012a59ae757b.

⁵ van der Veen, *Attacked at the Very Root*.

⁶ Steven Naifeh, and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh : The Life* (Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2011).

⁷ Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (David Suzuki Institute, 2018).

long after the tree is cut down, sometimes for centuries. Wohlleben says, “When thick silver-gray beech trees behave like this, they remind me of a herd of elephants. Like the herd, they too look after their own and help their sick and weak back up to their feet. They are even reluctant to abandon their dead.”⁸ But not all trees get such treatment. When they do, Wohlleben suspects that the trees that continue to send nutrients may be the children of the felled tree, or another closely connected relationship.

This kind of devotion resonates deeply with my work. Through meditative drawing and artmaking, I am bringing full attention to a lived experience of Bear Creek.

⁸ Wohlleben, *Hidden Life of Trees*.



Figure 4. Hannah Rowell, *Passage*, 2026, charcoal on paper, 24" x 32"

In *Passage* (Figure 4), a charcoal drawing from 2026, blurred edges suggest transformation, uncertainty, and dissolving boundaries. The softened foreground introduces instability, while clarity in the center provides a temporary sense of grounding and assurance.

One morning, while walking along Bear Creek, I encountered a fawn standing silently beside the trees pictured in *Passage* (Figure 4). There is something both enchanting and haunting about observing deer. They move as if they could simply vanish into thin air. Their gentle, quiet behavior is a reminder of their constant vigilance.

In that moment with the fawn, I froze, hoping the dogs wouldn't notice her. Within seconds, the little deer disappeared into the landscape. I was struck by her vulnerability and wondered if she would find her way to safety. This spot along the creek, like so many places on this land, is now imprinted with memory and connection to that moment.

This vulnerability awakened memories of my own kind of loss. When I was three, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Survival rates for Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma were only about forty-seven percent in the 1970s, and she did not survive. Childhood trauma ripples through the life of a child. It shakes the earth beneath our feet.

Life is like an unpredictable, winding river. After losing my mother, I would come to know loss again, through violence, addiction, and illness. There were years of healing and years of undoing. Like everything in nature, there is an ebb and flow. Healing does not come instantly, though sometimes the signs and messages in nature do. The loss of my little brother was especially painful; but, soon after his death, I felt his presence and heard his voice in the wind - with one big gust of assurance at just the right moment, reminding me that he knew he was loved.

When we moved to the woods, I was seven. I grew to understand that the earth has a way of communicating; and over many years since, I have come to see that we can learn from the change of seasons- that struggle brings growth and renewal.

I was taught that we also have a responsibility to the land. We have all witnessed how land development and human encroachment bring changes to the earth. I can see how the wild places my brothers and I knew as children have changed and have come to recognize that there is a specific kind of grief for loss of the land that we love.⁹

In his 1949 book, *A Sand County Almanac*, the eminent American naturalist, Aldo Leopold wrote, “One of the penalties of an ecological education, is to live alone in a world of wounds.”

⁹ Neville Ellis and Ashlee Cunsolo, "Hope and Mourning in the Anthropocene: Understanding Ecological Grief," *The Conversation* (2018). <https://doi.org/10.64628/aam.3wkksvr45>.



Figure 5. Hannah Rowell, *Forgiven*, 2025, graphite on dura-lar matte film, 11" x 14"

Forgiven (Figure 5), a drawing in graphite, focuses on an American Beech tree that I've passed daily over the last 23 years as I walk our little dirt road with my dogs and children. It is hollow all the way up the trunk, but the outer, living layers remain intact. This tree

continues to grow despite its wounds.

I often wonder what caused such an injury. Given its isolation, I think it is likely that something natural like a lightning strike occurred long ago.

I touch this tree as I walk by and often notice the beauty of the smooth bark. Beech trees develop 'eyes' - spots on the bark in an eye-like shape left from self-pruning where branches have fallen away. It wasn't clear to me until I drew it how the presence of this tree affects me. It has witnessed so much: the floods and droughts, the animals that come to the water at the end of the day, children playing and wading in the creek over the years.

The 13th-century Sufi poet, Rumi says, "The wound is the place where the light enters you."¹⁰ Our vulnerability can be the very place we find healing, and absence can be an opening rather than an ending. This hollow tree trunk allows light to enter the top of the tree and travel all the way through. In this way, it becomes a channel of light, a bridge from earth to sky.

Like the layers of time recorded in the rings of a tree, the layers of graphite and hours spent hatching and crosshatching, etched into my memory layers of meaning and significance. The process of drawing, transforming a blank piece of paper into a record of a familiar and cherished connection to this land, roots me to the place.

¹⁰ Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi* (Castle Books, 1995).



Figure 6. Hannah Rowell, *Received*, 2025, charcoal on paper, 25" x 42"

In *Received* (Figure 6), my daughter, Aila, stood on these roots by the Piney River, the big spring fed river that Bear Creek flows into. Aila was 6 at the time. She is now a high school senior, and I wonder if the roots still hold, or if they, too, like the sliver of time we call childhood, have washed away. The riverbank remains, certainly, though even that may have changed beyond recognition. This drawing anchors innocence to the Earth and the Earth to deeper mysteries of time. Our lives are fleeting compared to the timeline of the river. Yet, its movement, its clarity, its unpredictability reminds me to be in the moment.

Motherhood has also become a great teacher. Like the river, constantly moving forward, it seems we cannot hold on to any particular time, no matter how we try; but we can provide moments of clarity and softness to our children and to each other.

In this drawing, I extended and exaggerated the dark, mysterious water. The human element at the top of the picture serves to draw us up through the dark lower half, through the winding roots, to the girl, as if waking from a dream. The blurred outer edges created by the manipulation of depth of field also pull us into the intimate intersection of human reliance on nature and the mysterious ways we coexist with the earth.

Blurring some areas of the drawing provides an opportunity to bring attention and focus to others. These softened passages suggest transformation, the unfixed nature of perception, and memory; while high tonal unity creates a cohesive atmosphere throughout.

For centuries, artists have used softened edges and blurred brushstrokes to invoke a realistic sense of distance and psychological complexity. Leonardo da Vinci used a technique called *sfumato*

meaning “fading like smoke”¹¹ to create soft transitions between form and atmosphere. of his paintings into the distance and replicates the way in which the human eye sees. In doing so, he gradually merges the human subject with the landscape in a way that feels both real and dreamlike, contributing to the enigmatic and mysterious aura of the work.



Figure 7. Mark Rothko, *White Band No. 27*, 1954, oil on canvas, 81 ¼" x 87"

It's interesting to consider how paintings from the High Renaissance and contemporary abstraction may be tapping into the same sublime dissolution of form. In Mark Rothko's

¹¹ Alessandro Soranzo and Luca Taddio, "Perceptual Phenomena Cannot Be Approached from a Single Perspective," *Journal of Intelligence* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.3390/jintelligence11110214>

painting, *White Band No. 27* (Figure 7),¹² blurred edges draw the viewer into an immersive space where softness and ambiguity create a feeling of spiritual and existential suspension. Rothko uses thin layers of paint to create colors and shapes that seem to move in slow motion, vibrating against one another.

Unlike my drawings, his color field paintings contain no objective imagery, but both use softness to create meditative and contemplative spaces. Rothko wrote, “Many who are driven to this life [of artmaking] are desperately searching for those pockets of silence where they can root and grow.”¹³

¹² Emma Taggart, "6 Mark Rothko Artworks That Show His Progression into Pioneering Color Field Painting," My Modern Met, 2020. <https://mymodernmet.com/mark-rothko-paintings/>.

¹³ Marjoleine Boonstra, dir. *The Silence of Mark Rothko*, 2016. Documentary.



Figure 8. Hannah Rowell, *Lost and Found*, 2025, charcoal on paper, 36" x 32"

Lost and Found (Figure 8), a drawing in charcoal on paper, altered and transformed from a photo I took of my daughter Aviana, when she was 6. It was an unplanned snapshot of a day, like many others, engaging with the magic of these creekbanks.

Watching my children grow and explore in this place always took me back to my own childhood. After my mother died, my dad bought fifty acres in a remote part of Tennessee. He

wanted to get back to the land, and he rebuilt our fractured lives in harmony with nature while building our home by hand. The house relied on a passive solar design; no air-conditioning in the summer, a wood-burning stove, spring water: and my brothers and I spent long days outdoors exploring the woods and fields. In the drawing, *Lost and Found* (Figure 8), I'm reminded of a place where the boundaries between self, memory, and the living world begin to soften.

In her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer wrote that she wanted to teach her daughters to build a lasting, nurturing relationship with the land. "This is really why I made my daughters learn to garden- so they would always have a mother to love them, long after I am gone." ¹⁴ Kimmerer is acknowledging the deep connection to a nourished life her children can draw from always, and this echoes the exact reason I chose to have my family close to the land.

¹⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013), 126.

Part II: The Past

We do not take moonlight for granted. It is like snow, or like the dew on a July morning. It does not reveal but changes what it covers. And its low intensity---so much lower than that of daylight---makes us conscious that it is something added to the down, to give it, for only a little time, a singular and marvelous quality that we should admire while we can, for soon it will be gone again.

- Watership Down, Richard Adams

The Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard said, “Life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards.”¹⁵ When I look at my experiences along the little dirt road where I live, I consider my own cyclical understanding of this place. After decades of spiritual encounters with nature, incredible breakthroughs, personal losses and challenges that seemed insurmountable, I have often relied on seeing the sunrise illuminate the entire ridge across the marsh on a perfect morning; following the tiny footprints of a mother racoon and her babies along the same muddy creekbank where my children and I played; running up the hill behind the house with the dogs and watching their joy as they speed ahead and disappear into the field.

Living closely with this land has made me increasingly aware of the countless lives that have moved through it before my own. So many who experienced the same sunrise and moonset.

The small city where I live, Bon Aqua, which means “good water”, was a spa town in the 1800s and early 1900s. The mineral springs were globally renowned for their healing waters. On our little 12-acre spot on Bear Creek, the water is a haven for wildlife, but very few people have lived here in modern times. Our house was built in the 1930s. It was a small farm, and according to a friend whose grandparents owned the farm, the family was 95% self-sufficient. They grew their food and canned for the winter and utilized the same spring water we draw from today. Many years before this was farmland, someone hunted and worked with the land using stone tools we have found. Ages before that, there was a time when the earth where I stand was just emerging from the ocean. What is now known as Middle Tennessee had been

¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 2 (Indiana University Press, 1967).

covered by a shallow sea, and life above water was beginning to rise. The more I learn about the land here, the more I realize that layers of time coexist in this space, lying just beneath our everyday experience.



Figure 9. Hannah Rowell, *Ordovician Sea, No.11*, 2026, alcohol ink on Dura-lar Matte Film, 11" x 11"



Figure 10, Hannah Rowell, *Memories of the Ordovician Sea*, 2026, alcohol ink on Dura-lar Matte Film, 150" x 25"

The collection of ink paintings, *Memories of the Ordovician Sea* (Figure 10), abstracts visions of the ancient ocean during the Ordovician Period, an era of geologic time estimated to have occurred hundreds of millions of years ago. The series imagines the emergence of land from ancient waters.

These ink paintings are created by fluid movement and chance. As ink flows onto the surface, I only have a few minutes to move the painting around, creating imagery that oscillates between abstraction, water, and landscape.

Layered blues and greens evoke the ancient waters of the Ordovician Period. In the woods and along the creek where we live, we find fossils that record the story of life in that sea.



Figure 11, Hannah Rowell, *Memories of the Ordovician Sea, Installation View*, 2026, alcohol ink on Dura-lar Matte Film, rugose coral clusters (found fossils), dimensions vary

Positioned below the paintings in the installation are stones that my children and I have found on the land- large, fossilized colonies of rugose coral, a now extinct creature that lived on the sea floor or in reefs during the Ordovician and Permian periods (Figure 11). The lines in the surface of the fossil indicate their growth patterns, and scientists use this information to understand how the gravitational force of the moon has slowed the Earth's rotation. The lines can be used to measure time in the same way rings in a tree help us understand the life of the tree. Due to the slowing rotation of the earth, as recorded by rugose coral, scientists can see that an Earth year during this time lasted about four-hundred and twenty days.¹⁶

The repeated squares in the series are like moments, capturing the essence of a space in time. A glimpse of deep history and the profound relationship where time is altered, recorded, and unfathomable.

These paintings and the stones placed below bear witness to the complex history of the land. They reference the arc of time and consider the incomprehensible ways the Earth rebuilds herself. The tumultuous water in these paintings provides a sense of movement and dynamism. During this time in Earth's history, the days were shorter, the moon closer, and the tides stronger.¹⁷

¹⁶ University of Saskatchewan, "Solitary Rugose Corals," *Museum of Natural Sciences*, n.d.
<https://artsandscience.usask.ca/museumofnaturalsciences/programming/downtown-tour/fossils/rugose-coral.php>

¹⁷ John W Wells, "Coral Growth and Geochronometry," *Nature* (1963): 948–50.



Figure 12. Hannah Rowell, *Receding Waters (300 Million Years) No.2*, 2026, alcohol ink on Dura-lar Matte Film, 11" x 13"

Abstract landscapes drift from reality yet lead to a different kind of truth. They invoke memory, the sensation of time slipping away, and movement between emergence and disappearance. The blues and greens in this body of work call back to the age of receding water and rising land.

In the lead essay, “The Blue of Distance” from her book, *A Field Guide for Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit writes:

The world is blue at its edges and in its depths. This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. It disperses among the molecules of the air, it scatters in water. Water is colorless, shallow water appears to be the color of whatever lies underneath it, but deep water is full of this scattered light, the purer the water the deeper the blue. The sky is blue for the same reason, but the blue at the horizon, the blue of land that seems to be dissolving into that sky, is deeper, dreamier, melancholy blue, the blue at the farthest reaches of the places where you see for miles, the blue of distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue.¹⁸

One can never arrive at the distant blue, the atmosphere of lost light changes and becomes farther away as you approach it; in this way, it represents the very essence of longing. In a similar way, we can never embody the past or future as we seem to live in a constant state of the present. We can only dream of deep time and learn about how the earth has shifted and evolved based on the fossils we find - the past recorded in stone.

¹⁸ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Viking, 2005).



Figure 13. Hannah Rowell, *Ordovician Sea No. 2*, 2026, alcohol ink on Dura-lar Matte Film, 11" x 11"

In *Ordovician Sea No. 2* (Figure 13), I imagine movement in the blue water above the gently fading darker ocean floor. An intimate view as if floating within, hinting at the sensation of warm tides from long ago. In the act of making this artwork, faint recognition arises; and a longing to understand something very old.

To recover ancestral intimacy with land is to remember that the earth is alive and sentient, growing and changing, breathing and remembering. The ground where I plant a garden every summer, the yard where my girls turned cartwheels and played tag, and the dirt road where

my son rides his bike was once the sea. The fossils are evidence in the mystery of time and serve as quiet records of the history of what existed here before.

Considering the very limited understanding of time that our human minds are capable of; it is almost impossible to comprehend what has unfolded beneath our feet. Science can model and theorize; we can study evidence through fossils - but still, we can only glimpse the vastness of the earth's history. Every place we stand holds a memory of the lives that have inhabited it, and holds echoes of their meaning, value, and purpose.

In "Murmurings of the Land," Stephen Jenkinson says, "I don't know if a piece of land is understandable. I think the ultimate defeat of your intent is to understand it, is the understanding. That's why it's important, because it is bigger than you. No matter how small it is."¹⁹ In this passage, Jenkinson reminds us to be humble and recognize that our job is not to master the land, but to listen.

When looking at the history of the land, I see the present and past intertwined. The fossils and fragments left from earlier life on this land feel inextricably tied to my own lived experience. There is a deep feeling of humility and gratitude when we understand that we occupy only a very small moment in the larger story of place.

¹⁹ *Campfire Stories*, Mattias Olsson, dir., Stephen Jenkinson, perf., 2019. www.campfire-stories.org/murmurings-of-the-land.

Part III: The Dream

It was getting on toward moonset when they left the fields and entered the wood. Straggling, catching up with one another, keeping more or less together . . . always following the course of the brook.

- Watership Down, Richard Adams

The mysterious nature of time has been debated for centuries by physicists and philosophers alike. Theories such as the *block universe* propose that time may be less like a line along which we travel and more like a landscape in which events are laid out.²⁰ From this perspective, the experience of the passage of time may be determined by our perception and consciousness rather than time itself flowing forward.

Like scientists and philosophers, artists often dream of ways to explore these mysteries. Contemporary painter, Francis Bacon observed, "The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery."²¹ Our work as artists is not merely to reflect the world around us, but also to push the boundaries of awareness, to explore the unseen- the dream-like, the fleeting, the enigmatic. In doing so, we transform our everyday experiences into something more expansive.

²⁰ Joan A. Vaccaro, "The quantum theory of time, the block universe, and human experience." *Philos Trans A Math Phys Eng Sci* (2001). <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5990663/>.

²¹ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon: The Brutality of Fact* (Thames and Hudson, 1975).



Figure 14. Hannah Rowell, *Pieces of a Dream*, 2026, cyanotype prints on watercolor paper, white pencil and pens, 48" x 72"

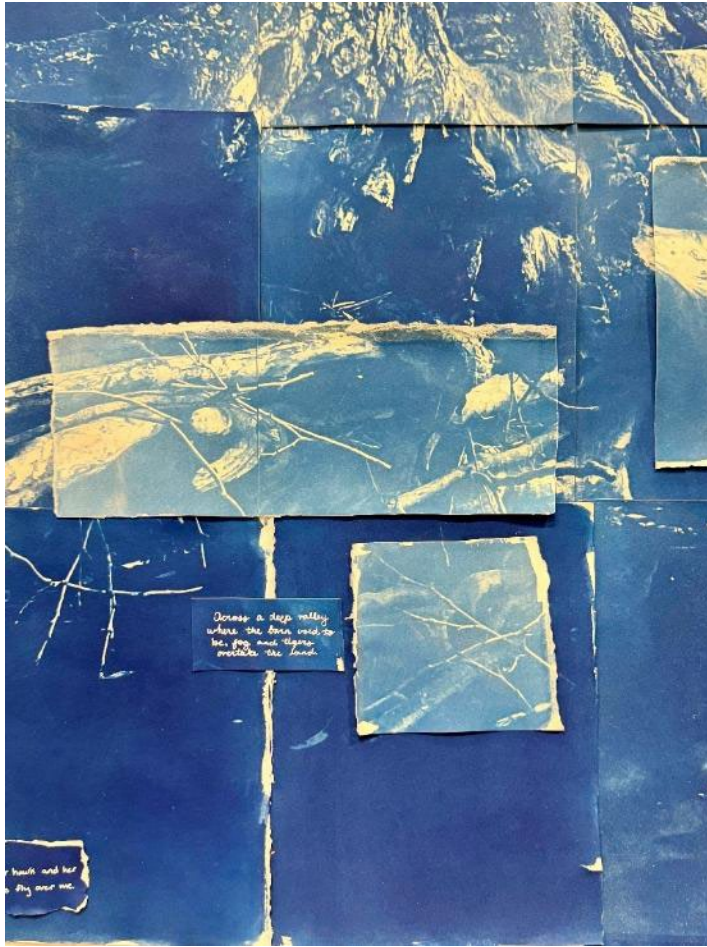


Figure 15. Hannah Rowell, *Pieces of a Dream (detail)*, 2026, cyanotype prints on watercolor paper, white pencil and pens, 48" x 72"

The photocollage, *Pieces of a Dream* (Figure 15) emerges from the convergence of reality and dreams- and from an image of another beloved and frequently visited spot on Bear Creek. Along our walks, we pass this stand of old trees, whose sculptural presence offers a great, boat-like bend as one sycamore curves out gracefully into the shallow creek.

To create this assembled work, I printed images in cyanotype on thirty-six sheets of watercolor paper and pieced this image together like patchwork. Cyanotype is an old

photographic method in which paper is prepared with photosensitive chemical compounds, an object or printed transparency is placed onto the paper, and both are then exposed to sunlight to create the image. Using light itself as a tool becomes a powerful metaphor and vehicle for the emergence of this blue dream-like world.

Some of the pages are toned with coffee and others have holes cut through to allow a passage through the scene. The torn sheets create an additional layer, revealing raw edges and second chances. This work embraces mistakes and reminds us that things aren't always seen in their entirety.

The fragmented images with subtle bits of text scattered within link us to a world of dreams and memories, a liminal place that comes in non-linear time with subtle shifts in light, weight, and color.

After printing the cyanotypes, I asked my teenage children Aila, Aviana, and Max to collaborate with me to put this work together. We arranged the pieces and decided where to write. They contributed by writing fragments of memories from dreams and childhood memories from their time growing up on Bear Creek.



Figure 16. Hannah Rowell, *Thresholds*, 2026, projection over reclaimed windows, graphite drawings, sculpted paper roses, string



Figure 17. Hannah Rowell, *Thresholds (detail)*, 2026, projection over reclaimed windows, graphite drawings, sculpted paper roses, string.

In the installation titled, *Thresholds* (figure 14), three old, reclaimed windows hang on the gallery wall, while a projected timelapse video of blue sky with ephemeral white, wispy clouds

washes over on a loop.

You cannot hold onto a cloud- they are the very essence of transformation and impermanence. Here, they are paired with something solid and grounded, the old windows from our farmhouse.

The windows are objects of personal significance and offer a brush with humanity within the cloudscape. Within and outside of the windows are sketches of birds and eye-like drawings which reference an old folk tale. Text of the story is printed beside the installation and is printed on the paper flowers made by my daughter, Aviana, which hang from the windows.

As the story goes, there is an old, blind hermit who lived on the edge of town. Her wisdom was widely known and accepted, but occasionally there would be a group of youngsters who wanted to prove that they were more clever than she was wise. One day, they concocted an idea that they would catch a bird and take it to her. One of them would hold the bird in their hands and ask her to use her wisdom to determine if the bird they held was dead or alive. They knew that since she was blind, all she could do was guess. If she guessed the bird was alive, they would crush it in their hands before opening, and she would be wrong. If she guessed it was dead, they would release it and again, she would be wrong. When they approached her hushing each other and snickering, she, of course, knew there was a trick involved. A young man held out his hand holding the bird and explained their query. She waited a long time to answer, then finally stated- "I don't know if the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that the answer is in your hands."

A story of uncertainty, choice, and possibility. A story that that may remind us that reality

is not fixed.

Like dreams, clouds resist fixed meanings. The bird becomes a symbol of potential- of becoming. The windows function as thresholds between inner and outer worlds, while the hermit occupies the role of a dream figure or guide whose wisdom points beyond simple answers toward deeper questions of responsibility and perception.



Figure 18. Hannah Rowell, *To Follow the Course of the Brook*, 2026. oil painting, driftwood, and plywood, 120" x 96"

The final artwork from this exhibition, *To Follow the Course of the Brook* (Figure 16), is an installation utilizing oil painting, found driftwood, and thin wooden cutouts of leaping rabbits.

When my son Max was 13, he and I found this huge, weathered root piled into a tangle of debris that had washed down Bear Creek after a flood. We climbed out over the little bridge

where the wood pile had lodged and carefully untangled this three-hundred-pound piece of root to drag it out. It is placed on the gallery floor as a grounding feature under the three bounding rabbits.

Rabbits and hares are often used in art and literature as guides. They can represent abundance, luck, and renewal. The rabbits that run through the scene invoke the memory of my brother, Josh, who passed away in 2017. He was a precocious, gifted child and somehow stumbled into an obsession with the rabbits of *Watership Down* when he was very young.

I included some of my favorite passages from Richard Adams' epic 1972 novel in this paper to honor my little brother, but also because the story speaks to land loss, change, perseverance, and perhaps most importantly - journey together - which after all, is the essence of life. We are here walking together through this ever-changing landscape, carrying one another forward.

Conclusion

Scottish American naturalist, John Muir said, “I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.”²²

Many times, over the last 23 years, when I’ve felt lost, I have found myself while walking along the creek, in the woods, or in the fields. I find peace in the movement of clouds and water; I find strength and motivation for perseverance in the sculptural roots of trees. I find evidence of hope in the return of the sunrise and moonset, the blooming of flowers and changing seasons.

The ideas within this body of work arise naturally from being immersed within the landscape of Bear Creek. Daily walks and explorations of the same paths lead to new discoveries. Studying the plants and rocks, watching the hawks and owls- every hour I’ve spent witnessing this place brings me to deeper reverence for it. These observations find their way into my artwork, shaping my understanding of memory, time, and place, loss, and belonging.

Tim Ingold wrote in his 2001 book *Ways of Walking*, “Life itself is as much a long walk as it is a long conversation, and the ways along which we walk are those along which we live.”²³

Across the Present, Past, and the Dream, the land reveals itself in cycles and in layered realities, in memory and imagination. As the ancient sea ripples beneath our children’s feet, time

²² John Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir* (Houghton Mifflin, 1938), 439.

²³ Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst, *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot* (Routledge, 2008).

becomes a quiet yet powerful presence moving within us.

In my thesis body of work, “Lost and Found: Love Letters to the Land”, I explore my connection with the land that I love, but this could be anyone’s story because the land belongs to all of us and we belong to it. When we return to a place of astonishment and wonder as we witness the living, breathing landscape, we may offer genuine love and gratitude- and in return find ourselves healed.

Appendix

Images from Thesis Exhibition,

Lost and Found: Love Letters to the Land

June 4th, 2026



Figure 1



Figures 2 and 3



Figures 4 and 5



Figures 6 and 7



Figures 8 and 9



Figure 10

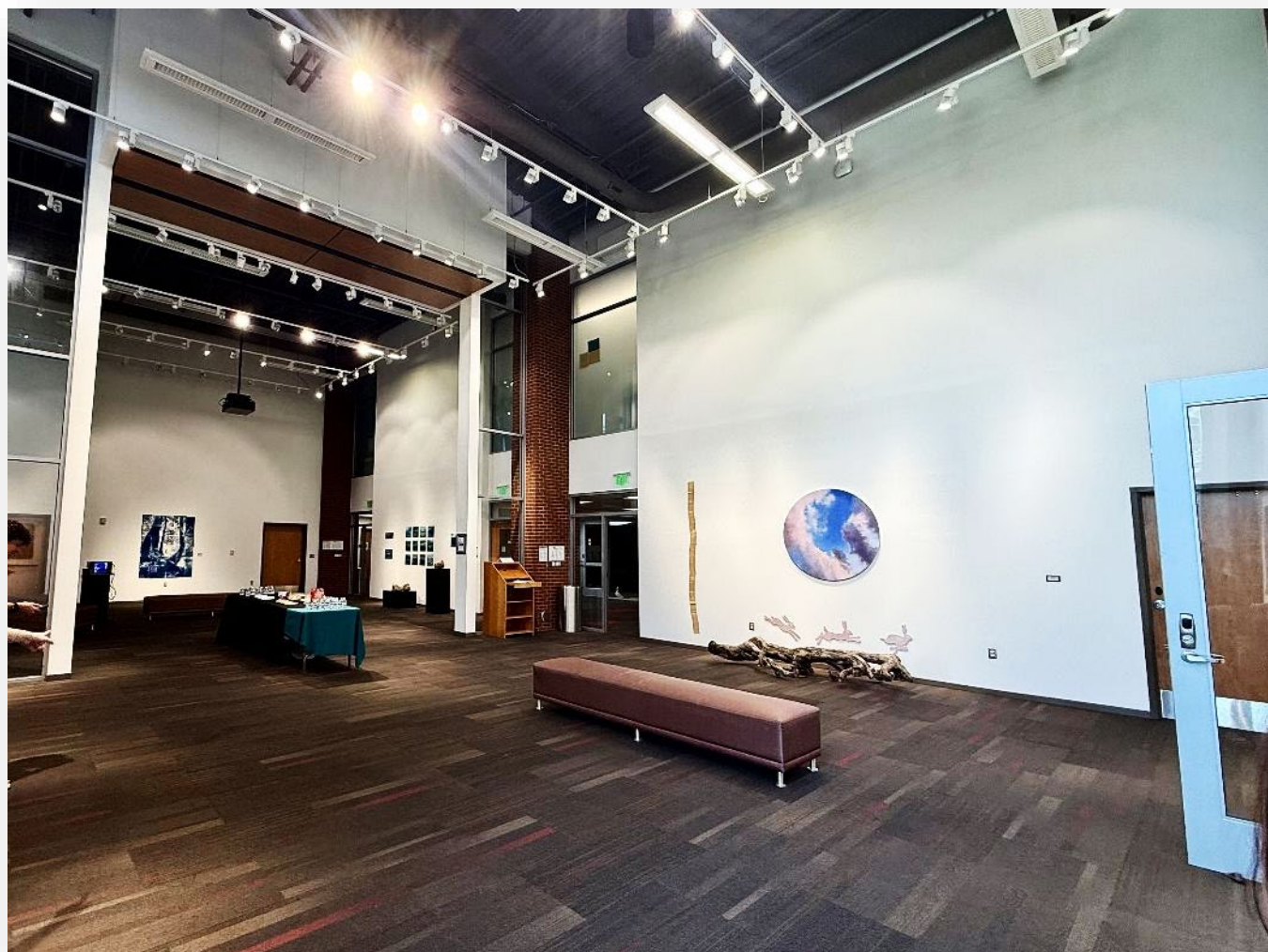


Figure 11



Figure 12
These images were taken by the author, Hannah Rowell. They are snapshots of life on Bear Creek.
2014-2020



Figure 13



Figures 14 and 15



Figures 16 - 18



Figure 19



Figure 20

What appear to us as the fixed forms of the landscape, passive and unchanging unless acted upon from outside, are themselves in motion, albeit on a scale immeasurably slower and more majestic than that on which our own activities are conducted. Imagine a film of the landscape, shot over years, centuries, even millennia. Slightly speeded up, plants appear to engage in very animal-like movements, trees flex their limbs without any prompting from the winds. Speeded up rather more, glaciers flow like rivers, and even the earth begins to move. At yet greater speed, solid rock bends, buckles, and flows like molten metal. The world itself begins to breathe.²⁴

²⁴ Ingold, "Temporality of the Landscape."

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