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In-between the Wind

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IN-BETWEEN THE WIND

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

School of Art

by

Victoria Vontz

B.F.A., Kansas State University, 2017

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ABSTRACT

In-between the Wind is a compilation of poems, short stories, theories, photographs, and drawings that reveal my relationship and connection with nature. Through prose, I expose and question my place in the world, how I see it and how I am connected to it, while photographic images and drawings leave space for thoughtful and reflective meditation. The work draws upon memories, discusses theories of connection, and aims to record ephemeral moments that often seem to be too easily forgotten.

INTRODUCTION

How I experience nature cannot be relayed in a simple or solitary form. My interactions, encounters, and discoveries regarding the natural world are often meditative and elicit complex emotional responses and questions to which I respond through a variety of artistic practices. This paper attempts to introduce all of these elements through language. I utilize various writing strategies such as original poetry, simulated dictionary definitions, and personal writing that reflect on my childhood, present experiences to being outdoors, and why this relationship to nature is engrained within me. This thesis moves back and forth between these various modes of writing to simulate an experience similar to my own in nature--one that is unpredictable and exciting and ebbs and flows with each turn of the page. I also draw upon research that I've conducted into writing by Annie Dillard, Mary Oliver, and Henry David Thoreau because their words served as a model for describing nature and helped me synthesize my own experience into writing.



Figure 1. *Evidence*, 2021.

The Nature Walk (ages 5–10)

Definition |

nature walk

noun

1. an exciting act of walking and climbing and wandering through any form of nature on foot to find new things and make fascinating discoveries

Synonyms |

adventure, nature hike, hike, morning exercise walk

Requirements |

1. Walks must happen at least once a week. They can take place either early in the morning before Dad leaves for work (these require waking up at 6:30 am) or on the weekend, midday when dad doesn't have to leave. (Mom is always welcome, but Dad seems to like walks more).
2. Dad must be present and close by at all times.
3. Wear tennis shoes.
4. Point out things that are new and unfamiliar.
5. Be curious. Ask questions. Dad will have the answer.
6. Collect treasures to bring home to admire. To remember.

“You could have stayed there forever, a small child in a corner, on the last raft of hay, dazzled by so much space that seemed empty, but wasn’t.”¹

I knew it wasn’t. I could hear every snap of a twig,
every anxious bird taking flight, every gust of wind soaring
above my head and rustling through the tallest treetops.

There was no room to be bored. No room to be empty. No
room to be still. Even now.

¹ Mary Oliver, *The Leaf and the Cloud: a poem* (Da Capo Press, 2000), 2.

As a kid, I remember constantly wishing for a warm spring rain to come. Every time it did I would hear the creek in the backyard, still streaming with runoff, as if it were gently calling me. I had to answer. After a rain, the ground claimed by the creek would become soft enough that I could dig my hands into the smooth clay-like mud and overturn rock after rock until I found a family of unsuspecting earthworms to study. Sometimes just with my eyes and sometimes with my hands. I was always very gentle with them, very careful. I did not want to injure them. How could I? I had just overturned their habitat, their home. I was fascinated, but also slightly remorseful. Why did I keep doing this to them? As soon as the fresh damp air and the soft resuming sunlight would hit their shining bodies, they would erupt into an erratic dance, chaotically twisting themselves into crazy patterns, and intricate knots. I thought they were trying to escape, but they never really went anywhere. I imagine I would do the same thing too if the roof was suddenly lifted from my house.

I stop. Motionless.

“Everything seems so dull I am amazed I can even distinguish objects. And suddenly the light runs across the land like a comber, and up the trees, and does again in a wink: I think I’ve gone blind or died. When it comes again, the light, you hold your breath, and if it stays you forget about it until it goes again.”²

Are these wild movements an expression of fear or a burst of joy? Seeing the world open up. Again.

² Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, (HarperPerennial, 1998), 12.

I was always hesitant to lay the rock back on top of their squirming bodies. Would I see them again?

Would they be flattened?

Or split in half?

Become two frenzied lines instead of one?



Figure 2. *Bird Drawing #1*, 2020.

Perhaps these memories
are stored in channels
hidden
beneath the ground,
just waiting for the exact right moment
they can resurface.

Perhaps they move
through
root systems
or underground water networks following my
every
move.

Or maybe they lie upon the wings of the birds soaring through the sky,
wind surrounding them,
feathers keeping them safe.

The temperature today, everything about this morning takes me back to the garage sale my mom would have when I was young. Tables that I have never seen before would appear in the driveway piled high and bearing the weight of junk I hadn't seen in years, but for some reason didn't want to let go of.

Mom would get up early, so early. Early enough to enjoy the soft morning dew on the freshly cut grass and the birds that watched the sunrise from the treetops. I always wanted to wake up early and help. Or even just to watch. To see those shimmering blades of grass and to hear that early chorus of birds call and respond. Whenever I asked, Mom acted surprised and tentative that I actually would get out of bed alongside the morning sun. She often told me it was too early for me to be awake, that I needed my sleep, but she would think about it anyway. She never woke me up.

Did she want to keep those mornings to herself?

*"When loneliness comes stalking, go into the fields, consider the orderliness of the world. Notice something you have never noticed before, like the tambourine sound of the snow-cricket whose pale green body is no longer than your thumb. Stare hard at the hummingbird, in the summer rain, shaking the water-sparks from its wings... A lifetime isn't long enough for the beauty of this world and the responsibilities of your life... Live with the beetle and the wind."*³

Perhaps she didn't feel this way. But I think that's how I would have felt if I were her.

³ Mary Oliver, *The Leaf and the Cloud: a poem* (Da Capo Press, 2000), 6-7.



Figure 3. *Cast in Purple*, 2020.

The Nature Walk (ages 11–19)

Definition |

nature walk

noun

1. an act of walking through nature, looking at nature

Synonyms |

happening to be outside, driving in the country

Requirements |

1. n/a

“The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?”⁴

What business have I in the world if I am only
looking and not observing? When did I forget?

⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*, (New York: Cricket House Books, 2010), 6.

The Nature Walk (ages 20–present)

Definition |

nature walk

noun

1. an act of wandering and wondering through any form nature
2. a daily practice of grounding that allows for a connection with the natural environment

Synonyms |

grounding, earthing, meditating, observing quietly, connecting with something larger

Requirements |

1. Be present
2. Watch, observe, witness

*More than looking. To look is to “direct one's gaze toward someone or something or in a specified direction.”⁵ But to be active within the act of looking is something different.

Something more. Watching is looking with intent, with purpose; to find or discover something. Observing is looking, but while actively taking in and examining, investigating everything that is being seen. Witnessing is looking, but while actively

⁵ "look, n.", OED Online, March 2021, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/110129?rskey=3QrSRY&result=1>.

being aware that what is being seen and experienced in that moment will only continue to exist in a memory.

3. Listen closely

4. Breathe deeply

5. Pay Attention

6. Experience

7. Connect

a. to something else

8. Reach out

9. Connect

b. to something larger

c. to something more

d. to something meaningful

e. to something powerful

f. to something alive



Figure 4. *Bird Drawing #2*, 2020.

I see you.

I hear you.

I see you and I hear you.

I'm looking and I'm listening.

Do I know you?

Can I know you?

Are you here?

I am here.

I'll

stay.

The clouds are holding their breath today

wanting to

rain

move

dissolve

burst

d

r

o

p

wanting.

They part and I breathe with them.



Figure 5. *Holding Water*, 2020.

*"It may be the rock in the field is also a song.
And it may be the ears of corn swelling under their
green sleeves
are also songs.
And it may be the river glancing and leaning against
the dark stone is also a deliberate music.*

*So I will write my poem, but I will leave room for the world.
I will write my poem tenderly and simply, but
I will leave room for the wind combing the grass,
for the feather falling out of the grouse's fan-tail,
and fluttering down, like a song."*⁶

It may be? It is. Maybe not to everyone. But to me,
it is. The world is a song. Full of soft, sweet melodies and
rolling, thundering basses written by the ingenuity of the
locusts and crickets, the dependability of the rambling
streams, conducted by birds in flight. The world is scattered
with perfect harmonies and wonderfully chaotic dissonance
that always finds a resolution. The key to hearing it is to
pay attention to the wind. Breathe when the wind is not.
Stagger your breath. Then you will find it. The moment, the
song that can sometimes only be heard in-between the
wind.

⁶ Mary Oliver, *The Leaf and the Cloud: a poem* (Da Capo Press, 2000), 14.

*“There is a heaven we enter
Through institutional grace
And there are the yellow finches bathing and singing
In the lowly puddle.”⁷*

The color yellow suggests many different things to many different people. Often it is associated with the sun, symbolizing feelings of optimism, joy, friendship, happiness, and warmth. Spiritually speaking, yellow is used to signify ideas of confidence, creativity, and harmony. Yellow is the brightest of all colors the human eye can detect. It’s energetic. An attention grabber. I guess that’s why I shouldn’t be surprised that on the day of my grandpa’s funeral, when a yellow bird landed on his grave, my dad’s family knew it was a sign. A sign that he hadn’t really left, that he would visit again and every visit would be full of warmth and happiness and energy and that same energy would be passed down through generations, to me, as I had never met my father’s father. Somehow, every time I see a yellow bird, I see my grandpa, full of happiness and joy. He never stays long, birds never do. But the same warm feelings always linger as I watch the small plump body of each yellow bird transform into a swift golden line and disappear.

⁷ Mary Oliver, *Evidence*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2009), 1.



Figure 6. *Tender Breaths*, 2020.

The wind is loud and blinding
and the sun can't part the clouds.

The birds are silent.

The leaves are yelling.

There is chaos

but I am still.

The wind wants to pull me in its direction. Any direction.

But all I can do

is stand.

Wait.

Observe.

Everything is unsettled and I am still.

I breath in, but the wind catches the air before it can make it to my lungs.

I laugh.

Well played.

I stop listening. I close my eyes and start to imagine the wind is water.

Urging me to budge in one direction, daring me to challenge it. To swim upstream.

I laugh.

When I am in nature,
especially the nature that naively seems to be untouched by humanity,

maybe I want it to be that way
it can't,
humans touch everything, affect
everything

private, alone, secret, all to myself,

the nature only felt by insects and sunlight,
by wind and water,
the nature that functions in the spaces often unseen by the whites
of human eyes.

It is here

I am satisfied.



Figure 7. *Look Up, Look Down*, 2021.

Methodologies

Photographs |

I want to relive special, magical, transformative and transitory moments spent in nature, although I logically know it is impossible. The sun's rays will never fall through the same exact pattern of the same exact clouds onto the same exact blades of grass to create the same exact three seconds of soft illumination, so gentle and warm. Fields of grass become undulating oceans and the highest treetops are set ablaze by the colorful blaze of a setting sun. The world turns pink. Then orange. Therefore, I photograph. Yearning to record not just what I am seeing, not just what the world is seeing, but what I am experiencing and feeling in those moments. I photograph to elongate those thrilling transformations in reality when conventional perspective shifts and I begin to see clearly for what feels like the first time. These moments come and go as they please. There is no formula to predict them, no way to coerce or prompt them. They transpire with or without a camera on hand.

Both experiences have their advantages. The absence of a camera allows for an interaction that is uninterrupted, fluid. It allows for my stream of consciousness to remain unbroken. However, when a camera is present, when the act of photographing is an option, my interaction with the world, with nature is only slightly disrupted by a jolt of electricity, adrenaline, and excitement that tells me to photograph, to record. I capture the moment so it can be recalled in a more physical and tactile manner. I want to record it, celebrate it. How wonderful it would be to be surrounded by photographs of a world that makes one question

everything they are seeing? Where a horizon line is absent, up is down and down is up. Perspective is questioned. Attention is placed in the idea of nature more than the literal space. Nature is no longer being simply looked at, but rather experienced.

The camera becomes a tool, an extension of myself. I play with deliberate focus and the camera's aperture to create images that are experimental and unconventional. I lower myself down on the ground to sit and breathe. I scan my surroundings, but I do not know what I am looking for until I see it. To the left of me a tree's leaves are trying to change their colors from a vibrant, healthy green to a brilliant orange, but only a handful have accomplished this task. The warm sun is setting behind this tree, making the auburn leaves glow as bright as embers in a dying fire. I pick up my camera and adjust my focus, so that the leaves are no longer crisp, but soft smoldering fields of orange. The photographs are not only records of time, but also a challenge to truly see, to witness something, to alter expectations. Are you actually watching and witnessing and observing? How would the world change if you were?

Along with focus and depth of field, I also utilize long exposures. These photographs differ from the others because they involve prolonged observation. The moment of capture is no longer instantaneous, but elongated. The duration of the exposure allows me to see more, capture more, say more, and therefore raise more questions. The chance of recording something unexpected and unpredictable increases with each second the shutter remains open. Will a soothing gust of wind rattle the naked branches of this tree? Or will a hardworking honey bee race

across the frame? Every sense becomes heightened as I watch. I open the shutter to record and branches are no longer static and crooked, but animated, chaotic and ephemeral. Stars are no longer far off pinpricks, but trails of subtly yellow and blue light and I am able to draw with them. Sometimes I attempt to imitate a gust of wind, other times try to trace the tree line. An expanded moment becomes a single image that urges the viewer to study it, read it, dissect it, question it.

Drawings |

Birds. I always come back to birds. I have tried to draw other things, like ants meandering their way through fallen sticks and scattered stones, gnats feverishly swarming around overripened fruit freshly fallen and seeping into the dirt below, and even the dancing shadows cast by large oak tree branches that reside in my backyard. Each yields a drawing, an experience that is unique and beautiful in its own right. But birds. Birds triumph. Birds make me want to draw, to record. Perhaps it has to do with the waiting. I sit and I wait. I look. I watch intently. Waiting. Anxiously anticipating a feathered friend to fly into my view, to land on a nearby branch or to soar across the sky. As I wait, my eyes start to dance. Every movement could be a bird, so I dart back and forth from fallen leaf to buzzing bee, from spooked squirrel to soaring dragonfly. And then suddenly nothing is still. When did everything start moving? Nature dances too.

And then it happens. A blue jay lands high up in a tree twenty feet in front of me. My eyes are locked and my pencil begins to move with every jump, every head tilt, every adjustment. I mimic. I record. I cannot break focus. They never

hold still. Why would they when the rest of the world is dancing? I have to take advantage of this moment. My hand never leaves the paper. The branch shifts. That's its cue. With a final quick stroke of graphite, the jay is gone. And I am left with a drawing. A drawing of time and energy. Of an ephemeral experience that is now relivable through a chaotic and lively line of graphite on a page. The birds have become my collaborators. My hand records, but they choreograph, they are in control. The experience is never longer than a couple of minutes, but in that time they have so much to say.

Lumen prints |

A lumen print is a camera-less process that utilizes black and white photographic paper, a subject coming into direct contact with the paper, and the sun. It becomes another record of nature. Of place. Of time. The process of lumen printing can be explained by science, but there is also an intrinsic mysticism woven into every print. From vibrant colors to abstract shapes to elongated shadows to dripping raindrops, there is often no telling what exactly and how exactly something is going to be recorded. Each lumen is surprising, exciting and unexpected. Each tells the story of a moment between nature, the photographic emulsion, and sun that results in an impression of the world that you and I now have the pleasure of beholding.

I have placed papers in various nooks and crevices, behind my favorite elephant ears or hidden in a dying pile of leaves. I want to keep them pinned down but to also keep them free, adjustable by nature itself. Hours pass,

sometimes days. I wait. Are you done recording? Have you finished what you want to say? I visit my elephant ears and smile as I find myself simultaneously looking at the ghostly branches of the tree above and the vibrant veins of the elephant ear leaves recorded in tender grays and blues on the paper. How did you do that?

*“My hands touch lilies
then withdraw;*

*my hands touch the blue iris
then withdraw;*

*and I say, not easily but carefully—
the words round in the mouth, crisp on the tongue—*

*dirt, mud, stars, water—
I know you as if you were myself.*

How could I be afraid?”⁸

How could *I* be afraid? How could *I* be lost? How
could *I* be alone? I have iron rich rivers in my veins, warm
sunlight in my skin, and powerful wind in my lungs. I
could never be alone. I have witnessed too much of this
world, I have felt too much of myself in you, in nature, to
believe I could ever be alone.

⁸ Mary Oliver, *The Leaf and the Cloud: a poem* (Da Capo Press, 2000), 44-45.



Figure 8. Installation View 1 of *In-between the Wind*, 2021



Figure 9. Installation View 2 of *In-between the Wind*, 2021



Figure 10. Installation View 3 of *In-between the Wind*, 2021

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VITA

Victoria Vontz is a visual artist that is drawn towards experimental image making, alternative photographic processes, creative writing, as well as other methods of recording. She received her B.F.A. with a concentration in photography at Kansas State University in 2017, and is a 2021 M.F.A. candidate in Studio Art at Louisiana State University. She plans to receive her Master's degree December 2021.