

Broken Forms and Empty Spaces: Bearing Witness
to Destroyed Landscape after the Iowa 2020 Derecho

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Abstract

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Tierratrauma, solastalgia, and ecological grief are terms that help describe the feeling of the deep emotional pain one experiences from negative environmental change. With weather events and natural disasters occurring more frequently with increasing intensity, these earth based emotions and loss of sense of place will become a more common universal experience. How do we grieve for lives beyond the human ones of our own? I personally experienced these emotions and loss of sense of place as a result of the Iowa 2020 derecho, which destroyed 70% of the tree canopy in my hometown of Cedar Rapids. Through my strong personal connection to the lost trees of my childhood landscape, this body of work explores a new and changed relationship to place and destroyed landscape through the lenses of loss, grief, trauma, and memory.

Mourning, processing, and documenting the loss and damage of the trees were the first steps in starting to remake sense of the place I call home. Initially, I used photographs, ink drawings, and paintings to respond directly to the destruction itself, making use of representation to historically document the damage for what it was and to discern where I wanted the work to go. As time passed and debris fields transformed into void-like spaces, I relied on my memories of place to begin to understand the new landscape that no longer made sense without the trees. Through the hazy, disorienting qualities of grief and the intangible, shifting qualities of environmental and emotional landscapes, I rediscovered the trees by looking into the space of their physical absence and painting their palpable, residual presence. The work serves as testimony, memorial, advocate, and healing for the lives of the lost trees and searches for a deeper empirical understanding of our innate human, nature relationship in the time of the Anthropocene.

On August 10th, 2020, a derecho, which is a type of storm categorized by its strong winds, prolonged duration, and widespread path of destruction, tore through the Midwest. Forming in eastern Nebraska, intensifying in central Iowa, and then continuing to travel across several states, the derecho caused \$11 billion in damage to crops, homes, businesses, and trees, categorizing the storm as the most costly severe thunderstorm system in United States History (Stewart). Category 3 and 4 hurricane force, straight-line winds for up to 50 minutes in some areas, caused violent and irreversible damage to everyone's beloved trees and forests. My home state of Iowa lost a quarter of its trees; and my hometown of Cedar Rapids lost 65-70% of its tree canopy, resulting in an estimated 1 billion pounds of tree debris for just the city itself (KWVL). Reports coming out nine months after the disaster have stated nearly 4.5 million Iowa trees were destroyed or damaged as a result of the storm, with 700,000 trees affected in Cedar Rapids alone (Kopelman).



Hourly composite of radar reflectivity for the thunderstorm complex that produced the Aug. 10 derecho. Shown in Central time. (NWS)

Image courtesy of the Washington Post (Henson)

I know a place for its trees; they've always been my entry point in conversation with landscape in my work. To see every tree I knew growing up with, which I had come to know, understand, and love over the course of my life, be so violently destroyed on such an extensive scale was jarring, traumatic, and hard to comprehend. I did not need to be there to experience the storm itself to feel its repercussions from over 1500 miles away in Seattle. I was simultaneously shocked but not surprised at my gut reaction to the loss of my childhood landscape. It confirmed just how strong my relationship is to the trees of my hometown and how important a role trees play in my every day life.

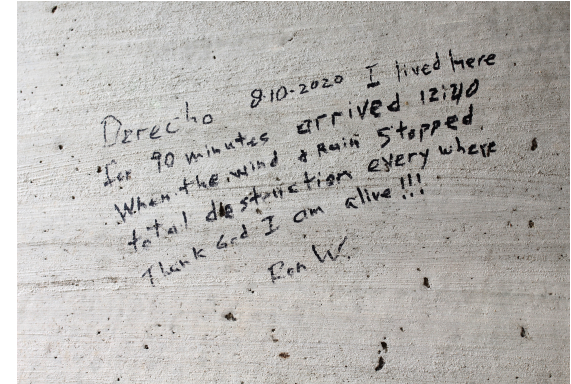
The event sparked my interest in beginning to explore my own personal relationships and histories with the lost trees. The first question I asked myself was why I felt so strongly about the trees. What was compelling me to uproot myself from Seattle to go back to Iowa and be with the trees in their demise? And I think that is a question whose answer continues to change, unfold, and reveal itself to me through my life experiences and progression of my work. Influenced by this past year's journey through personal loss and grief, my work finds itself playing the role of

“testimony, memorial, mourning, advocate, and healing” for the lost trees, and also as an avenue for investigation, reflection, and healing of my own (Socrates). My experiences and relationship with the effects of derecho have evolved from when the storm happened until the writing of this paper, so to talk about the work I created I believe it is necessary to talk through my thoughts, experiences, influences, and the work chronologically.

I could not see myself meaningfully engaging in work about the trees and the place I knew my entire life without physically being there. So, I packed up and moved back to Iowa for the fall quarter. The initial work was to experience the damage, take it all in, and start to grieve it. I think of trees as beings; beings that feel physical pain, that have bodies, knowledge, and senses. Bearing witness to their pain, physically sitting with them in their demise was an incredibly important, painful, and humbling experience that set the tone for the work I needed to make. Had I not gone back, I would not have know what it was like to drive around my hometown and see *every single tree* shattered, broken or uprooted. I would not have known what it was like to stand six feet in the ground of an uprooted oak and look up at the empty space where that tree existed for 100 years. I would not have known what it was like to witness the trees in a place I know like the back of my hand be completely destroyed in a day, and have that landscape slowly turn into a haunting void.

Photography was the first medium I thought to document the damage, feeling like a photojournalist as I drove all over town, and the state of Iowa, to see the wide spread extent of the destruction. Not only did the photos serve as reference for some of my paintings, but they also stand on their own as work to tell the stories of the trees and the people connected to them. Each tree, each person, each type of damage, has their own story to tell. From the large, looming debris piles twenty feet high to the small, intimate moments of remembrance for someone’s favorite oak, the photos capture the range of emotions, pain, grief, loss, and mourning felt on behalf of the human and nonhuman. Through the lens of the camera, I searched for my voice in the work. What story of the derecho did I want to tell? How was I going to tell it? The documentation imagery functions as historical record, but also as a tool for discerning themes I wanted to explore with the derecho.

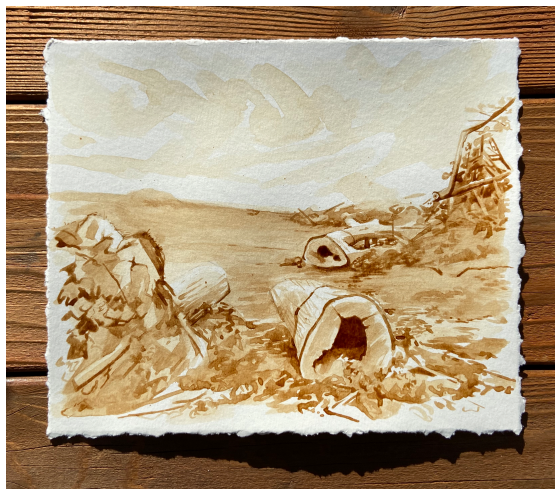




Documentary images in the aftermath of the derecho, 2020

Working with the image of destruction was important initially. I was not sure of how and to what degree my relationship with the lost trees and blasted landscape had transformed, so exploring these dramatic, bizarre tree forms in a realistic way helped me understand the forms with which I was dealing. The representation of destruction through documentation, ink drawings, and painting functioned as a way to digest some of the shock and horror, but also to genuinely convey the type of damage the trees sustained.

After disaster, there is so much physical debris. I wanted to incorporate the debris of the derecho in my work in a tangible way. There is a rich history of making ink out of natural materials, specifically oak galls, with artists including Piranesi, Van Gogh, Goya, Rembrandt, using the material as a means of sketching, drawing, and writing letters (Barker). It is a material that, when used, must consider the history of the material from which it came. With Iowa's native tree being the oak and with so many of them damaged, I wanted to find a way to incorporate the oaks in my work. I made ink out of one of the oaks we lost in the back yard, a tree I have watched grow my entire life from my bedroom window, to use as a writing and drawing material. Not only did I have a deep personal connection with the tree the ink came from, but also the material spoke directly of the destroyed subject matter itself.





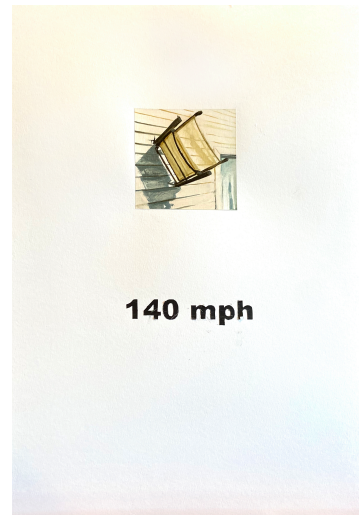
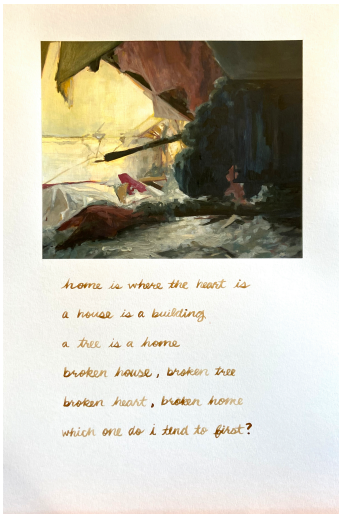
Drawings made with oak ink from damaged derecho trees, 2020

When I used the oak ink to draw and write with, it felt like I was having a direct conversation with the trees. They were sharing their physical pain, their story, with me as I shared my experiences of loss and grief with them. Using the ink made from derecho tree damage takes on the voice of the trees in a unique hybrid nature and human made form. In the number of oak ink drawings I did of the damage, the ink holds it's own image of destruction. In a way, it allowed the trees to speak of their own damage through help of my facilitation. The ink has the power to resurrect, and physically brought new life from destruction of the trees. As I wrote about the trees in their ink, I contemplated more deeply my relationship to them. Am I meeting them halfway to create a story *with* them? Am I writing *to* the trees or *from* the trees?

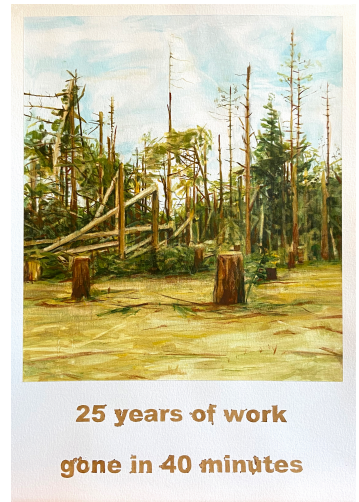
The ink merged with written expressions of grief to make visible the ambiguous sense of loss from the derecho and bring the presence trees back to life in another light. In *The After Experience*, each text was informed by the time spent sitting and listening to the trees as well as by my own grief. The written oak ink texts were placed next to a series of oil painted images of the damage of tree. The oak ink material of the text embodied both personal grief and voice of the trees, which provide a layer of affect that the images of damage alone do not provide. Not only does the text indicate a human experience of the damage, but also the physical connection to the damaged trees depicted, tangibly roots the image in the trees' experience.



the light on the ground sparkles differently. how i craved swatches of sea when i was young, now i wish for those sparkles back. it's not home anymore, it's too empty, the light is harsh and unforgiving now. it highlights the vacant spaces where my gaze and memories rest upon. they live on in my memory, but eventually that will fade away too.



every night i would look out my window to see if i could find the moon, and that maple grew slowly into my view of the sky. she hid the playground, the lightning and the stars. my weather tree. i watched her grow along side me, bend, endure, and fall. i carried her to the curb myself. the sky, the space, my room feel so empty without her. her moonlit shadows reached out and held me in the dark. my friend, i'll miss our conversations.



I started researching other artists making work about catastrophe and thought about how they could inform my work about the derecho. Artists have been reacting to and representing natural disasters in their works for centuries. Within the history of representation of disasters and catastrophe in art, I found inspiration for my larger works in images of Romantic era landscapes. In Romantic landscape painting, nature was something to be revered by humans in “fear, apprehension, and awe”, with its “uncontrollable power, unpredictability, and potential for cataclysmic extremes”(Socrates, Galitz). This attitude toward nature deeply resonated with my experiences of the derecho and initially was the kind of affect I wanted my works to embody. The jagged and imposing natural forms in Casper David Fredrich’s painting of shipwreck like icebergs, the light and atmosphere in J. M. W. Turner’s works depicting disasters both natural and human caused, and the ability for romantic landscapes paintings to walk the fine line between horror and beauty influenced my color, mark making, and compositional choices in my larger works (Mölleken).

Knowing I was going to end up back in Seattle, and eventually be transporting large work back to Iowa, I also had to think about the portability of my pieces. My photo documentation and ink drawings were small, but I wanted to paint on a larger scale to mirror the sheer scale of destruction. I devised a system that was both durable and compactable, choosing to use a series of Masonite panels as a substrate for my first larger piece of my derecho work. Back in Iowa, I had little control over the size of my panels, ultimately having to use a mix of the 2’x2’ and 2’x4’ sizes I had. The experience with these constraints ultimately affected the conversation between the materiality of the panels and the compositions of my paintings in an unexpected way.



Assembled, oil on panels, 6’ x 10’, 2021

Assembled was the first painting I did on these series of panels, started in my studio back in Iowa. Inspired by the number of dramatic tree forms I experienced through documenting the tree damage, I composed a space where a variety of these forms, drawn from both observation and memory, could gather, and cast them in the warm, healing light of the setting sun. Inspired by the Romantics invoking feelings of the sublime, the composition walks the fine line between awe and apprehension, concealing the horror of the tree damage in plain sight through temperate, golden hour light. The light is transitional and temporal, as well as something you have to wait to experience at the end of the day. The composition incorporates representations of derecho tree damage, while the light indicates the passage of time since the event, and marks a beginning of incorporating the trauma of the natural disaster into the narrative of my own life.

The grid became an interesting facet to the work as it alludes to the painting's materiality, while it also denotes a specific set of distortions. In Rosalind Krauss' essay about the function of the grid in art, she notes that logically speaking, the grid can extend, to infinity, in all directions (57,60). So conceivably my paintings are small, cropped views of the landscape, but do not shake the reality that space and landscape continue beyond what you can see (60). The paintings are only a glimpse into the experience of the derecho. In my larger works, the grid not only functions as sort of fragmentation, but also a piecing together that mirrors the shattered landscape and the experience of trying to remake sense of a place you once knew. The concept of the grid extending in all directions, or rather, the functionality of the grid to do so, influenced the subsequent compositions of *Rememory of Absence* and *Rememory of Presence* as well. Initially while painting *Assembled*, I was working on a 6'x10' scale. Because of the flexibility the grid provides, it allowed my paintings to grow upward to an 8'x10' scale and changed the composition of the works to allow the atmosphere in the works the space it needed. I also found the irregular sizes of the panels allowed for certain areas in the composition to have uninterrupted moments in the landscape. These larger continuous spaces within the composition and grid of the piece allows for the viewer to visually extend into those spaces, subverting the modulation of the grid.

As I continued to follow the paths of individual trees and spaces over a longer period of time after the derecho, I observed the changing, fading, and inevitable erasure of the trees from my home landscape, and experienced a new disorienting feeling in the void they left behind. As I witnessed the landscape change, a few important subjects and themes emerged within my work: the broken forms of the trees and the empty spaces left behind once they were cleared, and my changed relationship to them both. The tangible presences of the trees and their debris became an intangible voids. As my relationship with the tree forms transferred to the spaces, I began asking myself more questions: What gets erased in the physical removal of the trees from the landscape? What do I see when I look into the now empty space left behind? What role does my memory of the trees play in the work? How is my grief held, or not, by the trees or empty space? I took these new experiences and questions to think about with me on the road, as I traveled back to Seattle.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the beautiful lives that affected the way I painted when I got back. Over the past year, I have lost a number of friends and family members which made me think about my relationship to the trees lost in the derecho differently: our beloved family cat died in my arms at the beginning of 2020, my 22 year old cousin Michael just didn't wake up one morning later that year in April, my grandmother Marion passed away peacefully in her sleep at the beginning of 2021, and my best friend Mikayla was accidentally killed while helping someone else two weeks after my grandma. Each of those losses felt different and was absolutely heartbreaking in their own way, but they all made me reflect on the physical, mental, and emotional spaces they took up in my life. Their deaths changed my relationship to the spaces and places they embodied and inhabited. When I look into the physical empty spaces left behind, I still see and feel the memories I have of and shared with them. Like the loss of close friends and family members, I felt the loss of the trees like I lost a loved one and the memories of the trees were now held by the empty place where they once stood.

Grief, pain, and trauma are not immaterial, they have the power to embody and have a “palpable extension within the world” (Bennett, 49). As my grief for the trees out-folded into the physical world, I experienced a new and changed relationship to the voids in my hometown landscape. In Dylan Trigg's *Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, he states:

Being attached to a place means allowing memories to be held by that place. In turn, being held by a place means being able to return to that place through its role as a reserve of memories. Not only do places hold memories in a material sense—as the archive of our experiences—but those same places crystallize the experiences that occurred there (9).

The trees were the keepers of my memories of place, especially of my home, and perhaps this is the reason I am so strongly tied to them. In their physical absence, the place I know as home was unrecognizable. My grief of the trees had no tangible thing to hold onto in the empty space left behind. I felt an overwhelming need to document, record, and memorialize these memory holders and places, transferring their embodied presence into another physical form not only to hold my personal memories of place, but to keep the memories of the trees alive as well.

Trauma resists representation, psychologically and aesthetically. In *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Bennett states:

Normally – events are processed through cognitive schemes that enable familiar experiences to be identified, interpreted, and assimilated to narrative. Memory is thus constituted as experience transforms itself into representation. Traumatic or extreme affective experience, however, resists such processing, its unfamiliar or extraordinary nature renders it unintelligible, causing cognitive systems to balk; its sensory or affective character renders it inimical to thought – and ultimately to memory itself (23).

In terms of processing the deaths of friends and family, as well as with the deaths of the trees, trying to make sense of their losses was incredibly difficult and affected my motivations and the direction I wanted to take my paintings. My lived experience of complicated and compounded grief seemed to dissolve my hand for representation and form within the work. Forms and feelings were scattered, fragmented, and nothing seemed to make sense or felt tangible anymore. Painting from a place of traumatic, non-processing translated into the large-scale images of derecho blasted landscapes filtered through the lived process of memory.



Rememory of Absence, 2021 (left), and *Rememory of Presence*, 2021 (right)
Oil on panels, 8' x 10' each
Henry Art Gallery installation shot, photo courtesy of Jueqian Fang

Rememory of Absence and *Rememory of Presence* mark a shift within the work where grief, mourning, and memory start to play a larger role with sense of place. In the remembering of what places were before the loss of the trees, the simultaneous retrieval and erasure of forms within the works reflect the “reworked, reconstituted, and reconfigured” characteristics of our human ability to preserve memory (Trigg, 67). What am I able to hold on to and what am I letting go? The light, atmosphere, panels, and mark making all function as a sort of fragmenting, but also piecing together of the remembered landscape that embody the fleeting, shifting, and intangible qualities memory and haziness of grief. I see each of these works bridging these two

realms: the physical and the spectral, the tangible and intangible, one of presence and one of absence. The paintings are also connected through this same dichotomy.



Rememory of Absence, oil on panels, 8' x 10', 2021

Rememory of Absence is about looking into the empty space left behind in the landscape and teasing out what Jill Bennett calls “manifest traces: not simply marks that tell a story of the past, but indications of a lived present, a mode of inhabiting both place and memory” (70). The fleeting memory becomes materialized in the act of painting, and emerges from the past and to become a sustained, more permanent moment of the present. These traces and image of memory emerge through mark, hinting at the presence that once existed there. Taking inspiration from Turner and the ephemeral qualities and timelessness of the light and atmosphere he creates, I relied on a warm palette of memory and nostalgia as opposed to realistic landscape color to amplify the sensation of loss, absence, and nostalgia within the work.

The painting has a static sort of quality in comparison to its pair. Perhaps this developed from their names early on, and the associations each word carries. An absence carries with it a silence, stillness, emptiness, a haunting, spectral, ephemeral quality; while a presence presumes

existence, a physicality, and tangibility. The two terms are symbiotic; absence is defined by presence as presence can be defined by absence. In the process of painting these works, I ultimately was filling absence and erasing presence within these landscapes of memory, neither resolving to a resolute state of being fully one or the other. The continuous state of becoming reflects the changing states of the physical landscape and memoryscapes, inside and outside of the painting.



Rememory of Presence, oil on panels, 8' x 10', 2021

Rememory of Presence recalls the trees more clearly, where the force of the storm takes a more active role in breaking apart the memory of the trees and place, physically erasing through forms in the painting process. The presence of the trees are in the process of becoming an absence, imitating the force and effects of the storm itself. Where in previous works I focused on damage, the aftermath of catastrophe, this piece is engaging with the moment of destruction itself. My strong memories of the trees and place are resisting the physical power of the wind it took to break these trees in reality. The active role I had in the erasure rather than creation of forms in painting also implicates my relationship, and perhaps even role as a human in causing this climate change catastrophe, and the active shifting and altering of the damage itself.

For a while I searched for the right words to accurately describe how I felt about the trees, but nothing quite fit. Nostalgia didn't quite represent how I felt about the losses or the remembering of what used to be, I knew memory had its part to play, but I had trouble finding the words to accurately describe my grief for the non-human and the loss of sense of place I was experiencing. In my research, I came across Glenn A. Albrecht's book *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*. He coins the term, "solastalgia," which is "the ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home – the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one's sense of place – the homesickness you have when you are still located within your home environment" (38-39). As part of the overall feeling of "solastalgia," another emotion one can experience is "tierratrauma". It happens when "people who possess a deep connection to the earth, they can experience a deep emotional trauma when that connection is directly impacted by powerful forces, natural or humanmade – it is the moment when a person experiences a sudden negative environmental impact, virtually or by direct experience" (84). This term poignantly described the "raw, earthly, gut wrenching" emotion I had in response to the derecho and helped me realize that I was not only dealing with personal grief and trauma, but I was specifically dealing with "ecological grief" (37).

In their study "Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss", Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis define the term as "the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change" (275). It is a natural response for people who are attached to a place that has been affected by, for example, a natural disaster; it can be a heightened and more intense response especially when they consider that place "home" (275, 278). At the time of the derecho and the start of my work inspired by the storm, I was only able to understand grief as I felt in relation to loss of loved ones, which I connected to my understanding of trees as living beings. I understood person based grief, but am still learning to understand place-based grief and what role that plays within my work. Place based, ecological grief can result in ambiguous loss, or loss without closure, meaning, or clear understanding; there's no one to blame or point your finger at for a natural disaster, which can leave you stuck in the grief process "living with both the presence and absence of what was lost" (279).

Now that I have the terminology to articulate the emotions felt as a response to the derecho, it makes sense that my work aligns with and operates under the concepts of solastalgia, tierratrauma, and ecological grief, and as part of the larger conversation about feeling and grieving for the nonhuman. Artists over the centuries have felt and made work about this same sense of grief. Artists like Edvard Munch, his painting *The Scream* can be read as a personal response to the tierratrauma of witnessing the Krakatoa volcanic eruption in Indonesia in 1883, noting in his journal it felt as if "a great, infinite scream [had passed] through nature". Additionally, Dali responding to "the desolation of mind and landscape as a consequence of war" and the Romantic painters overall contribute to the concept of ecological grief and loss of sense

of place (Albrecht, 45). The response to the derecho with my work is no different, feeling the Munch-like scream from the trees penetrate my soul from 1500 miles away.

What drew me back to Iowa after the derecho was my deep connection to the trees and my interest in knowing more about why I experienced such a sense of loss and grief. My work in response searched for an understanding of that experience through my personal connection to place and the sense of home I found in the trees. The derecho split, snapped, and uprooted my entire childhood landscape, and it felt as if every memory of those trees had suffered the damage too. In diving into my personal connection with the trees, I discovered that place is synonymous with the trees that fill it. Trees are rooted in place, as place is rooted in the trees. Creating a new relationship with place meant processing the damage, trauma, and loss caused by the derecho and forming a new connection with the empty space the lost trees left behind.

The empty space in the landscape after the storm I experienced as a void without the trees. I could only see what was not there anymore because of the storm, a sort of tunnel vision in the new expansive and unnerving “empty” space. While empty space can make us feel vulnerable, sad, and scared, it can also be full of potential, hope, and possibility. With time and space to reflect, I feel I am finally in a place to start being curious again and to start asking more questions. How as a city, as a state, as people do we recover after disaster? What can and will grow back in these empty spaces left behind? What trees will replace the ones lost in the derecho? What has already been put into the works? By humans? By nature’s resiliency?

After living through natural disaster and the aftermath, it is important to move forward with hope and find resiliency within ourselves as we continue to face catastrophe in the ongoing climate crisis. Though my work was born out of personal loss, I have come to know what I experienced as ecological grief and I consider my work about the derecho a starting point. As ecological grief becomes a more universal experience as a result of climate change, the role of the artist becomes increasingly important in telling the individual and collective stories and realities of our changing human-nature connection amidst the Anthropocene. Sharing and amplifying our emerging common experiences of ecological grief will not only deepen our empirical understandings of climate change, but will also help extend our empathic capacity for the lives beyond our own human condition.

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