



Jennifer Pullen

## Seeking Joy in the Classroom: Nature Writing in 2020

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“Focus on your breathing. What does it feel like to be in this space, to smell this air, to be in your body, now?”

The guided meditation coming from my cellphone speakers instructed us to breathe, to focus, to be present in the moment. We stood next to a little patch of woods, the ground around our feet seasoned with acorns. The wind in the trees interspersed by chattering squirrels and a stereo blasting “Smells Like Teen Spirit” from a dorm window a quarter of a mile away.

We all wore masks, but for a moment we tried extremely hard not to think about them, or our elderly family members we couldn’t visit, or the fact that most days, our classrooms smelled like bleach and hand sanitizer, and every sneeze felt like a klaxon.

We opened our eyes and began to read out loud together, line by line, one of the micro nature essays from Charles Finn’s beautiful book *Wild Delicate Seconds: 29 Wildlife Encounters*.

In Fall 2020 my campus came back to in person classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. We were lucky to be a small university in a small town, with a Pharmacy doctorate on campus, so we were able to have onsite rapid testing. Our students tend to be high achievers and generally rule abiding, so our mask compliance was excellent. Our ventilation systems had all been renovated over the summer for maximum air exchange, and classrooms set up for six foot spacing and sanitation. We managed to pull off in person classes in relative safety, but it didn’t stop the mental toll the constant vigilance took on the faculty, staff, and students.

In this pandemic Fall, I was teaching a new class, a one credit creative writing workshop intended for students to generate work and practice skills, without the pressure of grades, and without having to do a lot of outside of class work. It was required for English majors, but open to all other majors. As a course, it highlighted the unusual place that creative writing holds within academia: it is both a serious discipline and provides classes that students will take just for the joy of it. In Fall 2020, we were all in need of more joy than ever.

After a week or two, though my students were coming into class ready to learn, ready to try activities from ekphrastic poetry, to flash fiction, or the micro personal essay, depending upon the class period, I began to notice they were looking more and more tired. I, too, was getting more exhausted every day. The watchfulness required to sanitize every surface, to monitor our distance from everyone at all times—it wore us down. I found myself having a hard time bringing my mind into the creative space each day, all of my worries instead chattering away at the back of my head. If I was feeling this way, I knew my students were too. I asked them if they would like to begin each class period with a five-minute meditation, to center ourselves in our bodies, in time and space, and create room to be creative. They said *yes*. It helped all of us focus on class afterwards. But something still felt missing to me. Until the day we went to the woods.

I asked my students to meet me at the back of campus instead of in the classroom, next to a little patch of trees by athletic fields and a walking path. We read out loud Charles's Finn's essay about meeting a black bear. Line by line, our voices brought the black bear, its beauty, its deliberate movements, and the Oregon woods, to our little patch of Ohio forest sandwiched between cornfields, campus facilities, and roads. I asked students these questions:

1.What parallels do you see between the language choices and pacing of this micro essay, and our meditation practice?

2.How does careful observation of nature keep us in the moment?

3.What does Finn do to treat the bear with dignity?

4.What concrete details let you feel and experience the Oregon forest along with Finn?

After a brief discussion, I left students with those questions, and gave them all twenty minutes. I told them to wander into the woods, to find something to observe closely and carefully. To take the essay, and their bodies and breath, into the forest. After twenty minutes, I instructed them to stop and then write something in whatever form came to them about what they saw. Finally, after about ten minutes of writing, we would come back to where we had first met, and reflect together on what we had experienced and written.

We spiraled off into the trees, into the autumn leaves crackling beneath our feet, into the preserve of blue jays and the highways of black squirrels. The woods began to swallow the campus noise. I watched a spider, long legged and golden backed, waiting for its web to quiver, for food. Death, life, and hunger entangled on a bush.

Afterwards, when we met on the walking path, I couldn't help but see my student's eyes shining above their masks. Windblown hair, scarves uncoiled, paper clutched in their fingers. Many had never actually wandered into the woods on campus before, only walked past on the way to somewhere else. Several of them held acorns like precious objects.

I asked them what they saw. They gave me wonderful specifics about fungi, birds, squirrel nests, the wind rattling dead leaves. One student summed it up. We saw everything, they said, everything.

Later, I would read their micro essays and prose poems, and weep a little at my desk. For a brief time, grades, Covid-19, politics, all of our obligations, were set aside. Of course, all of the problems of our lives and world still existed. We hadn't solved anything. But we'd re-discovered the way art and nature can deliver people to a temporary island, a finite, but valuable sanctuary. They also produced some of the best writing I'd seen all semester.

We kept meditating before each class period. Several students told me that they went back to the woods again, that they started trying to do so at least a few times a week. I told them I was glad. I felt humbled by their gratitude. I hadn't really given them anything. We'd only found what was already there, the world in an acorn, in our breaths.