*The following essays are the introductory entries for “Stay in No Realms: Seeking and Essaying,”*

*my monthly blog for the Georgia Writers Association*

**Find Your Paint Smudge and Pumpkin:**

**Beginning a Creative Nonfiction Pilgrimage**

*January 2019*

I come to the first entry of this column on the craft of creative nonfiction with an admission: There is no way. Or if there is a way, it fades once its boundaries are prescribed. I’m thinking here of the opening words of the Tao: “The way that can be told is not the eternal way.” And these, from the Gospel of Thomas, also come to mind: “Let the one who seeks remain always seeking.”

Creative nonfiction is a way like this—a seeker’s path, a pilgrimage—and the essay is its substance. The essay, more than anything, is a mode of being. It is an endeavor, an attempt. It dwells off the page as much as on, often in the most insignificant and mundane experiences. As soon as it is scrutinized beneath what Thomas Merton called “the official fluorescent light,” its spirit departs. The etymology of [*essay*](https://www.etymonline.com/word/essay)—in its noun form and also its underappreciated verb form—suggests far richer possibilities than what has been drilled into our heads by an educational system obsessed with reward, punishment, and categorization. The essays of which I speak aren’t the ones we wrote in school where we couldn’t use “I” or even our own voices or draw from our experiences and everything came down to a grade, which is to say a wreckage. True essays are fluid. They abide on a spectrum and aren’t so much concerned about end results.

In a 1984 [interview](https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-howard-finster-12492#transcript) for the Smithsonian Institution, speaking of his time pastoring churches before receiving the vision by which he determined to “paint sacred art,” northwest Georgia folk artist [Howard Finster](https://www.high.org/highlights/howard-finster/) revealed an inner conflict that, to me, echoes a core conflict of writing, creative nonfiction in particular: “When you’re pastoring a church you have to stay within the realms of its doctrines. And I don’t like to stay in no realms of no kinds of doctrines. I like to feel free.”

Over the past couple years, perhaps stretching back beyond my knowing, Finster has become a creative guide for me, a trickster-teacher of sorts, a fellow seeker who has imparted that the key to art—be it literary, visual, or otherwise—is simply to create it. The artist, which is to say the essayist, needs no authorization. If you have a curious mind, an open heart, a willingness to speak back to power, a sense of wonder for all things, an acceptance of your own strangeness, and a grace for yourself at times you do not, then you can write an essay.

Perhaps to keep me ever mindful that in this column I’m speaking to myself as much as anyone, and to keep me honest in my belief that creative nonfiction is more about each moment along the path than any forgone conclusion, just as I thought I was wrapping up this entry, [Yayoi Kusama](http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20180925-yayoi-kusamas-extraordinary-survival-story), another artist-guide, entered the picture. With Finster on my mind, having settled on his “stay in no realms” phrase as the overall title for this column, my family and I recently attended Kusama’s “[Infinity Mirrors](https://atlantaintownpaper.com/2018/11/art-review-yayoi-kusama-infinity-mirrors-at-the-high-museum/)” exhibit at the High. Standing out among all that struck me there—including the mirrored rooms that defy the concept of “realms” altogether—was learning that a simple encounter with a pumpkin sparked so much of Kusama’s creative vision and energy. By the line outside the mirrored room “All the Eternal Love I Have for the Pumpkins,” a polka-dot placard noted: “Kusama vividly remembers the first time she saw a pumpkin. As a child, she visited a seed-harvesting farm with her grandfather, where a particular pumpkin’s large, head-like shape spoke to her in ‘a most animated manner.’”

I realized then, though their art is vastly different, that Kusama and Finster set out on their creative paths by regarding the inscape, the singular charge, of seemingly unexceptional moments and objects. For Kusama, the vision arrived as a pumpkin among pumpkins in a field with her grandfather; for Finster, it arrived, while he was repairing a bicycle, as a smudge of enamel paint on his fingertip resembling a face and telling him—in “a most animated manner,” one might say—to create sacred art.\*

Thereafter, the life’s work of both artists, their creative pilgrimages, became defined by seeking and recreating the “animated manner”—the *anima*, the soul, the spirit, the infinite vitality—that characterized those moments.

Your entry point for each essay pilgrimage you take, each endeavor through the wayfarer’s gate, waits in whatever moment, whatever memory, whatever concrete object, whatever sensory perception, whatever image that speaks to you in such an animated manner. Whatever kindles the will to seek beyond the imposition of boundaries, walls, realms—that is the place to begin.

***To carry with you …***

What is your paint smudge, your pumpkin? What are your small moments, concrete objects, and sensory perceptions that could call you down the pilgrimage path? Mine have included a [fall on a stroller jog](http://www.stilljournal.net/christopher-martin-cnfcontest2016.php), [whale drawings by my children](http://drafthorse.lmunet.edu/nonfiction/martin.shtml), [a glowworm beetle](https://issuu.com/loosechangemag/docs/lc_v4.1_content_embedded_revised_3.), [my daughter’s response to an R.E.M. song](http://www.newsoutherner.com/2013/03/16/walking-around-shining/), and so on.

This, to me, is the most stirring part of essay writing—when you don’t know where you’re going, where you recognize that something has stayed with you or meant something to you but you’re not sure exactly what and you want to see if you can find out. And you might not ever find out, which is okay. Art emerges from the attempt.

Take five minutes to list, without censoring yourself, as many small moments, concrete objects, images, or other sensory perceptions—the more seemingly insignificant, the better—that could spark an essay. (Don’t worry whether or not what you list *will*spark an essay; wandering and wondering are the only goals at this point.)

Spend some time—days, ideally—reflecting on and daydreaming about your list. Pick out one item and begin to journal about it, focusing especially on sensory detail. Begin to add narrative, make connections, incorporate some insight. Aim for something short—500 words or so—and see where it takes you. Feel free to share your reflections in the comments, through social media, and email.

**Little Yellow Flowers:**

**Notes on Finding Your Craft by Losing It**

*February 2019*

Though I’m writing this column on the craft of creative nonfiction, I’m not all that interested in genre boundaries. It’s not that I’m against them outright: Such distinctions are helpful to readers, letting them know generally what they’re getting into and what conventions they might encounter along the way. And genres—though in this sense it might be better to think of them as *modes*—are helpful to writers in providing ways of delivering content and vision. Considering the most effective means to express such things is clearly an important part of the writing process. If you’ll humor me along the way, I’ll get there one of these months, in one of these columns.

But I try not to worry about these boundaries just for the sake of worrying. There’s enough of that in a day. My morning, in fact, has already been consumed by it. Consider the flowers: Not even the essays of James Baldwin or the stories of Flannery O’Connor or the poems of Mary Oliver are arrayed like these, however close Baldwin or O’Connor or Oliver get, however close you or I ever hope to get. What matters is the art, the way it speaks to us, the way it resonates in the hearts of those who consider it.

Thomas Merton writes that “the little yellow flowers that nobody notices” on some insignificant roadside are “saints looking up into the face of God.” And while she was a bit more hesitant than Merton to use a word like “God,” I think Mary Oliver would’ve said the same about what she called the “reckless blossoms of weeds” in a nondescript part of the yard where she’d buried a stillborn house cat. It is in the marginal, the outcast, the disregarded, the ignored, the overlooked, the intersecting, the ecotonal, where the possibility of art exists.

Call it sainthood, sanctity, spirit: It is the vocation of artists to notice this characteristic in unnoticed things. It doesn’t much matter whether this noticing—essentially, this *presence*—leads to an essay or a poem or a story or any other genre of art or, for that matter, anything at all. The moment I try to put that characteristic charge into the bounds of genre tends to be my first step in inadequately expressing it. But at times when I’ve stumbled into my voice and retold a moment as best I could—at times I’d say I’ve created some kind of art, in other words—I’ve noticed there is no discernible difference between how my notes for essays look as compared to my notes for poetry, for example. So my creative nonfiction craft tip for this entry is simple and maybe strange: Leave your craft for a while. Forsake it, even.

In an interview for the [current issue](https://www.pw.org/content/januaryfebruary_2019) of *Poets & Writers*, poet and essayist [Hanif Abdurraqib](http://www.abdurraqib.com/) says that he feels “charged with representing nothing in the world as small, nothing in the world as mundane,” going on to describe an outlook that reckons “moments of living off the page” as critical to his craft—perhaps even more so—than what goes on the page.

Novelist [Anthony Grooms](https://www.ajc.com/entertainment/books--literature/unsolved-murder-jim-crow-south/75Eoi7NrjZWva5dnDhhDnM/) offered a similar view when speaking on the fiction craft to a group of young writers with whom I work, telling them that one of his approaches to writing—in the kind of non-approach of which I speak—was to try to notice one new thing along the way each time he’d go for a familiar walk. Word counts, writing time—these things are important, but they cannot precede presence. Go for a walk or stay right where you are: Take things in without worrying what they will become when you write them down. Simply be a human—such a refreshing and frightening identity when we truly remember it—with no particular aim at all.

Another approach might be to take on, for however long you’d like to try it, the label of being a writer of a genre other than the one to which you’re accustomed. Memoirist [Linda Niemann](https://unmpress.com/books/cosas/9780826358752)—a teacher without whom I would not have my own memoir (or essay collection, or full-length work of hybrid creative nonfiction and poetry, or whatever you want to call it)—once encouraged me—and I can’t recall if she said this outright or if it came across through her teaching—to think of myself as a poet even while writing creative nonfiction. I can’t claim to have achieved that, but it’s a teaching I’ve always tried to follow.

I was reading an essay by Mary Oliver the other day, the evening after I learned of her passing, and got so lost in her words I thought I was reading a poem I had never encountered.

***To carry with you …***

What can you do today, tomorrow, this week to shed the label of “essayist” or “creative nonfiction writer” or “writer”—or even “hopeful writer”—for a short time? Feel free to share your reflections in the comments, through social media, and email. In a future column, I’ll hopefully have something to share about how it worked out for me.

Ideas for future columns? Any topics or questions related to the craft of creative nonfiction you’d like me to address? I’d value your input on shaping what this space will become!