



## CREATIVE NONFICTION

### Exemplars from the Write the World Archives

Our guest judge Stacey Donovan selected two stunning pieces of creative nonfiction as the winners for the Personal Narrative competition. Reprinted below, these essays demonstrate the artistry of weaving together scene and reflection, capturing singular experience within universal themes, and hopscotching through time by flashing forward and jumping back. In short, “Second Star to the Right” and “My Father’s Father” offer secrets to what this creative nonfiction genre is all about. Enjoy!

#### **Second Star to the Right** **By Emily Reeves**

They kept him hidden under disappointed sighs and thin smiles, banishing him to a half-life when they murmured, “Oh, he’s no one, dear.” Saying it made it true. He was no one, he was nothing, he was spirit fumes and smoke.

They swept him under the rug like startled hostesses, realizing they had forgotten to get rid of offending dirt. With slight curtsies and hasty apologies, they welcomed me as a guest and led me to a seat, trampling his grave of Persian carpet. I shifted my eight-year-old body for a more comfortable fit, but the armchair was stiff with lies.

Our meeting held many firsts. He was the first man I’d seen with hair longer than mine and the first man who smoked—really smoked with a cigarette and everything—in front of me. My face flamed when he cursed, but I liked the way he swished the word down with his Miller Light, his lips curling into a smile when my mother hissed at him.



His stringy mane and beard were almost regal, and his eyes were green as seaweed and as murky as Louisiana swamp water. A disciple of the sea and a loiterer of the docks, the air around him was distinctly salty. Without a net to mend or an oyster to crack, his rough hands found his pack of Camels and lit up. After the first time, he was careful to hide them from me, but I spied on him when he slipped into the garage, watching as he puffed clouds of nicotine.

Hidden in the haze, unbridled at last, dreams could be dwelt on, and desires could tiptoe out of dark crevices. There was no shame in his smoke—only obscurity. Unseen in the fog, he was no one, he was nothing, but he was free. So free that he floated up and out of society’s sphere and into another world.

When the encounter was cut short, they tried to render him bodiless and fashion him into a ghost once more, but I had already touched him and decided he was very much alive. His strong bones, oiled at the joints with whisky and gin, hummed with an infectious boyishness. Peter Pan of the Sea, vanquisher of the clean and tidy, he sprinkled ash like pixie dust and became the stuff of legend.

Legend, because people of his ilk were hearsay and rumor—never seen but spoken of in whispers. I lived in a fortress built on a foundation of rules and regulations, barred from the world’s dangers and vices. My world was safe. Controlled. His divergence from that world horrified me. Enticed me.

I’d become a giantess by our second meeting—10-year-olds were practically adults—and I resolved to stick to him like a suckerfish, even if the respectable relatives shooed me away in hopes of preserving my virtue. During the drive to my aunt’s house, Grandma said he smelt like a barbeque pit, but I thought he smelt like s’mores—I had always liked mine burnt.

Peter Pan was playing cool today, legs propped up on a crate, cigarette hanging from his lower lip, and I thought if he weren’t so old, he would be the sort of guy my friends would



save dandelion wishes for. His smile, now yellowed, still had a lazy charm, and I wondered how many girls once dreamed about that impish grin.

I observed behind hooded lids as he lounged, laying bare his secrets. Sun-baked skin from the docks, hair inspired by rock bands, a stoic expression learned from the navy. I longed to steal his ash tray, to toss the embers on the breeze, and walk through a curtain of sparks, emerging on the other side of society, where nights were longer, but where truth was shining, and freedom reigned.

I was toeing the ground, dragging a line into the dirt, eying his half of the world where the law was lawlessness, and people did what they wanted simply because they wanted it.

I wanted to step over the line.

So I did.

It wasn't quite like Neverland, but it wasn't like the safety behind my mother's skirts, either. I took greedy gulps of his toxic, secondhand smoke, pretending I, too, could conquer this king of killers. He grinned, I grinned back, and I was almost flying when the relatives returned and dragged me back to the ground.

I never saw him again, but they told me the cancer took half his tongue, half his jaw, and all his pride. For a fisherman, he didn't know much about lures—he was hooked from the first puff, the first swig, the first jab of the needle.

Now in his patched up trailer, he waits for the pixies to spirit him away.

We wait for the phone call, for the death of someone forever young.

And I am left to wonder if chemotherapy is a fair price to pay for a life of sweet, reckless abandon.



\*\*This man is a relative of mine, and I chose not to name or address his family relationship to me for two reasons: first, as a person who holds mystery and an aura of "otherness," he seems accurately portrayed when he is nameless, and secondly, revealing his identity felt invasive.

**My Father's Father**  
**By Takeacake**

I admire my father. I thought he was invincible and unfazed by life challenges. He could do everything I thought was impossible. He could climb trees as tall as a mountain, and move like a seal through water. He beats me at everything from games, sports or trivia. He is talented, and hard-working. He supports his family by working two jobs while balancing time for himself, his family, and friends. But when I grew older, I realized my father wasn't the impenetrable shield I imagined.

At the time, my grandfather recently had died of cancer. I didn't like my grandfather, and I hated listening to his rants about how lazy, disrespectful, and idiotic I was; arguments he held only with himself. Whenever I spoke back to him during these rants, he'd threaten to whip me with his leather belt. Sometimes he'd threaten to beat me just because he wanted to. My grandfather seemed to dislike everyone, including his son, whom he constantly complained about. My father humbled himself before his father and continued to help his father throughout his illness. One day, I asked my dad how he could tolerate his father.

"Don't mind my old man. He has always been that grumpy, so I've learned to accept it," he said.



Two months after the passing, we stood before my grandfather again. It felt unreal seeing his stony, aged face. In death he looked at peace, and still, I expected he'd sit up and rant about how shitty he thought his service was run. I had to remind myself this was an abandoned vessel now. My dad didn't visit the altar to see the corpse nor share any sentiment about his father during service. My father was detached; he stood frozen by the church entrance, isolated from the entire family until it was time for burial. My dad, among other relatives, carried the casket to the grave. We stood at the edge of the grave plot, peering down at the closing obsidian-colored capsule containing what used to be my elder. I had to wipe the tears from my eyes.

My father hadn't spoken a word on our ride back home, nor had he looked at me, my sisters or my mother. Later, I went searching for him. Supper was ready, and my mother wanted me to gather everyone to the dinner table. I found my dad outside on the patio. He stood in a haze of burning tobacco; he was enjoying a smoke.

"Ma wants you to dinner!" I notified.

"Okay. I'll be there," he replied. The patio was ill-lit. His face was eerily illuminated by the burning cigar loosely hanging in his mouth. His eyes looked red and fatigued. He didn't look at me; instead, he focused on nothing in particular, but the ambient darkness ahead of us. He blew out a puff of smoke. He still wore his suit. It was dirty from the burial. He blew another puff of smoke. My father rarely smokes. He smokes in solitude, but he never stopped anyone from approaching him. He appeared to me like a troubled vigilante who was taking a moment to relax after a tiresome mission; similar to the characters I was fond of in fictional literature and art. I caught myself deep in thought and staring intensely at my dad.

"Is something wrong?"

"No," I said. I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment.

"Do you miss him, too?"



“Not really,” I replied. I knew he was asking about my grandfather.

“Why not? Didn’t you love him?”

“I don’t think he loved me, so not really,” I confessed.

“But you still cried. Why?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I tried walking away, but my father’s voice stopped me.

“Don’t you wish you could have a better relationship with him? Is that why you cried? It’s not him you miss; you miss the potential of forming a strong bond with your grandfather, isn’t it? Now that he’s gone, you cannot hope to have a better relationship,” he explained. His voice was disquieted. I never heard my father sound so upset.

“I don’t know,” I repeated. I didn’t want to look at him because I was afraid he’d notice my glossy eyes dripping tears.

“I want you to understand my father, and I hope you don’t hate him for his actions. He was especially tough on you because you were the only son of his eldest son. He’s always been this way, but I think it was to prepare me for the cruelty in this world. My father didn’t treat everyone like this. He was beloved by our family, and I’m sorry you only experienced his cruelty growing up,” he explained.

I failed to stifle my crying as hiccups of frustration escaped me. I promised myself not to cry over him or his death. I was convinced that I didn’t care, yet I was contradicting myself. I was angry; angry at my grandfather, angry at his actions, angry at those he treated better than me, angry at myself, and angry at God for allowing such a relationship. I was bawling aloud. I couldn’t believe how easily I lost my composure, but I settled once my father wrapped me in his arms. I clung to him; my arms tightly closed around his torso. My



breathing was hoarse and my chest heaved through shaky breaths. He comforted me and we stood together in mutual silence until I decided to part from my father's embrace.

"I'm hungry, so I'm going inside," I announced.

"I'll join you," he said, and together we walked back inside. When we entered our kitchen our family looked puzzled. It was obvious we had been crying because our eyes were stained, yet no one questioned it. My mother didn't complain that my father hadn't changed out of his dirty suit nor did she mention how late we were to the table. She served us our meals, and we enjoyed a quiet, humble supper that night.