



CREATIVE NONFICTION

Exemplars from the Write the World Archives

Searching for a better understand of creative nonfiction? Look no further! The extraordinary essays reprinted below 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. These captivating narratives offer secrets to what this genre is all about. Enjoy!

King of the Hill **Hannahjs (US)**

Snow ate the children alive, froze the bodies of squirrels brave enough to leave their hidey-holes and resisted the cavalry of road salt trucks, and yet we got in our cars each morning when I lived in the great state of Indiana. Eight inches, nine, a foot of marshmallow fluff could eat up all the details of the earth and I would still wake up to don thick snow pants and walk to the family minivan. Driving through snowbanks is a tactical maneuver, an art, my father gripping the steering wheel like a Bible and whirring the engine's pistons into a furious buzz.

Back then, I was never late for school. I couldn't be, since December was the month of our war-game.

I had a friend then, Carrie, a faithful right-hand-man in every aspect of my life but especially in the battles of the cold months. We would don snow pants and puffy coats, pink mittens and ear muffs, and wrestle in the game "King of the Hill", played annually on the snowbank the plows created by our playground.

I'd whisper plans into her ear. "You get Nick, take him down. Tackle him. I'm gonna push Claire."

The object of the game was simple—be the last man standing. Anything goes. Carrie and I shoved through swarming armies of prepubescent boys, collapsing the tunnels they dug and shoving fistfuls of snow into their ski masks to force them into retreat. It's a minor miracle that the teachers watching over the bloodbath didn't say anything.



That day, the snow seemed to my five-foot tall body to be a million feet high. Claire, the girl that tormented Carrie, lorded over the hill with an iron fist. She stood at the top, which was her first mistake. That's the mountain's weak spot.

I clambered past the petty squabbles at the base of our mountain to face Claire, who looked with her perfect steely blue eyes and brushed snow from her perfect mini peacoat. I said nothing. I just threw all my weight at her and we rolled down the mountain, an asteroid of pink boots and hissing utterances of forbidden swear words and Claire's babyish cries. My nose bled at the bottom of the mountain. I felt the blood thicken and freeze on my face when it hit the cold, a clear battle trophy, since injuries were a coveted sign of strength in this game of war. Claire scrambled up, brushed snow off her coat, and stared in disgust and defeat.

Claire walked off alone. I climbed back up. Standing in the king's spot, it was easy to understand Claire's hubris.

Carrie and I won that day, a million years ago, the time when winning "King of the Hill" defined the entire experience one had in winter. But now, in the distant kingdom of Seattle, the snowfalls of my youth have faded to a gentle drizzle of freezing rain and my family is far away. It's me and my mother and father, my siblings, my blind grandfather who is dependent on us sometimes but will never admit it.

Besides the fact that we've aged out of war-games, things are mostly the same in Seattle as I remember them from Indiana. But things everywhere are the same, really, if one can get past the fine print. The friends are the same, the final exams, the slop of school lunch and the strange smells from the girl's toilets.

Fine print is all I've ever known to change. It's the details of the la-dee-dah of high school humdrum and boys and soccer games and drama club. The pep assemblies, a mediocre cheer team and a soundtrack of emo-pop music remixes and anthems to love bygone that the kids want so desperately to relate to.

Suburban loneliness is the only thing that's truly new. The children here don't seem to have their own version of a war-game when winter comes. Family and old neighborhood alliances that I knew in my youth are dissolved here, never existed here, a place where the eponymous "Seattle freeze" is not one of the many urban myths to color the city's culture.

In the new place, a prison of rain clouds and a paradise of pine trees, I sometimes call Carrie and spin tales of the new form war-games have taken. A thousand miles apart, both of us scrambling towards the top of our respective heaps, battles to form alliances and get good test scores and go into a good college. Both of fighting to become king of the hill in war-games of our own creation, no guidelines without the snowplow to cut battlefields in the earth.

It is now almost eight years since my last winter war-game, and my main victory since is that I can drive now. And here in Seattle, people drive in the eternal rain with lane-shifting



fury. There's no nuance, none of the carefulness that came with life in Indiana, a life I spent learning to cruise over ice.

Instead, the occasional visits of ice to sloping Seattle roads are always a fatal affair. The winters here seem gentle to me, though, as a girl born into a February blizzard and raised in schoolyard wintry war.

The cars are the commonality between my two worlds, the calm. The cars that take me to school, the grocery store, the cars I fantasize about taking a road trip in. The cars that are supposed to link families together and cut distance like butter in voyages over interstates and country back roads. I wanted that to be the lifeblood of the cars, finding a way to return home for a gleeful spar over a snow mountain, dinner with aunties and uncles and cousins no more than strangers to me now.

But here, in this place that's so far from the home I knew, December is a constant reminder. My car, too old to make the journey, and my family, unwilling to, are more effective anchors than anything else could be.

Christmas Beyond the Steel Platform Thechosenonemico (Philippines)

The Sky Garden of the city mall was a lavish expanse of flashing green, yellow, and red— a beautiful painting of colors under Quezon City's night sky. The evening was breathing alive with the sound of people— families seated on clay tables enjoying the cold and the brightness of December, couples walking hand-in-hand into stores and restaurants, adults plowing through the mall's December sales and promos, and individuals just enjoying their same old world temporarily revamped by the dawning of Christmas.

Three Badjao kids, who all could not have been older than 8, were running around the labyrinth of adorned Palm trees and bushes a few feet from where I was seated. The Christmas lights dangling on wooden shades and lamp posts cast Christmas colors on their dirt-smeared faces as they enthusiastically played tag. Their eyes reflected the bright glint of the Sky Garden. Their tattered dirt-brown shirts were a stark contrast in the vividly colorful garden.



“Taya!” The largest kid cracked into a huge smile as he reached his hand to pat the butt of the smaller Badjao boy, taunting him with a broken laugh. The smaller boy then went to chase the only Badjao girl into the rows of Santan bushes, trying his hardest to maintain his balance at the same time.

While the two smaller Badjao kids were at it, the largest kid walked to a clay bench nearby where he recollected a pile of twenty or so Ang Paos (Chinese red envelopes), and two rusting tin cans. By the time the other two returned laughing and catching for breath, the older one was already on his way to the steel platform at the entrance of the Sky Garden, emptying the contents of the Ang Paos into one of the tin cans as he walked. My eyes followed their trail until the last Badjao kid disappeared into the darkness beyond the steel platform.

It was already half past seven. A few more minutes of stalling was the last thing I needed on a Friday night when more people than usual are going to flood the bus stations. It was 18 days before Christmas, after all, and most students and workers here in the city would come home to the Provinces for the Christmas break. I lifted two of my handbags containing a week’s worth of used clothes with one hand, and a paper bag of half-eaten cheese burger and lime juice on the other, and went towards the steel platform.

The steel platform was connected to a large footbridge that branched to different commercial establishments, crisscrossing 20 feet above the huge sea of vehicles along the North EDSA road. With the railings already wrapped in white Christmas lights and tiny tin foil lanterns, you can easily see exactly where the Christmas wonderland stopped, marking a demarcation line from a separate, entirely different world— one which appeared to have a different Christmas.

The footbridge was cloaked in a muggy darkness. If it wasn’t for the few hand-held lamps, it would’ve been nearly impossible to walk through what appeared like a jungle of beggars, makeshift-stalls, and vendors.

Where there were bursting lights and colors on the other side of the steel platform, there were barely any light here in the footbridge. Plastic snowmen, trees, elves, and lanterns were nowhere to be found; carts, stalls, products, and plastic trashes were the only decorations. Jose Mari Chan's Christmas music was replaced by the buzzing vendor chants, street children noises, and beggar pleas.



I saw the three Badjao kids darting towards the area where the footbridge branched out to three other walkways. They joined a group of other Badjaos who were huddled on a circle. As I approached the crossroad, the faint light from a huge billboard just less than two meters away showed what appeared like a beggar banquet— six large Spanish bread, four pieces of Saba banana, and three Balut eggs laid on a folded Manila paper. Just beside the Manila paper was a huge tin can where all the Badjao kids' collected coins and paper bills for the day were stacked.

Before I could turn to the left walkway leading to the bus stop, a thin hand stretched out to me. It was a Badjao woman. In her stretched-out right hand was a worn-out Ang pao. In her left was a baby.

“Merry Christmas.” Her broken accent matched the frailty in her voice. Her eyes bore an innocence that was very telling of her age. She couldn’t have been older than me.

I've been here many times before, and it's always been the same marginalized individuals stretching the same frail hands with the same recycled Ang Paos. Nothing much has really changed; the dawning of Christmas never really had an effect in the footbridge.

I took the Ang pao, slipped in the 50 pesos change that I had in my pocket, and turned on my heel to continue my walk just in time before the guilt and powerlessness burdening my chest to swallow me whole.

As I neared the end of the footbridge, I can't help but look back at the steel platform. The Sky Garden, along with the whole city mall in all its hugeness, is a piercing shimmer of affluence in the midst of the mute shades of city dust and smoke and poverty. In my weekly journey along this footbridge for the past three months since I started my first semester in college, I have clearly seen how Christmas amplified the dichotomy between two worlds that existed on either side of that steel platform— one with nights that have become more brighter and livelier, and another with nights that haven only gotten darker and colder.

**Tomorrow
Vin (US)**



Last Christmas I got a bike.

It wasn't a wake-up-in-the-morning-and-there-it-is present. Instead, my dad and I went a few days before Christmas to a bike shop in town, so that I could choose for myself. I was fourteen, and had been riding my mum's bike, when I'd had occasion to ride one. In the last few years I'd shot up in a rush and tangle of limbs, and my old bike sat abandoned in the back shed.

Rain cascaded down on my me and my dad when we got out of our car; the kind of misty rain that's like standing near a waterfall. It had been like that for days; grey, wet, dreary, and monotonous.

Two cats patrolled the bike shop. Standoffish cats who glared disdainfully at customers invading their home, who slouched off to curl up in corners where they could avoid disturbance. They say that people are often like their pets. It was true of the woman working behind the counter. My dad and I were a source of irritation. We tried bike after bike, and she watched us, sighing and wrinkling her nose. Customers or not, she seemed to consider us invasive. When I asked to try out one of the bikes on the sidewalk in front of the store, she shook her head, crisp white bob swishing, nose wrinkled like a prune.

"No. Too wet."

Tired of wrinkled glares, we decided to try another store. On the way out, my elbow brushed at line of bikes. I tried to catch the first one, but it slipped through my fingers, and one by one the bikes toppled like dominos. The cats yowled. The woman looked as if she wanted to, but she only puckered up her reddening face, and helped us fix the bikes. My cheeks burned hot, and I bit my lip. I felt like a five-year-old under her accusatory stare; like a guilty child. I didn't mean to knock over the bikes. But she looked at me with a glint of certainty in her eyes, certainty that I had done it on purpose. I wanted to sink through the floor, but it was hard and unyielding, like the woman's eyes. We left quickly, heads dipped by guilt.

We found a bike at the next store. It shone with electric beauty, black and purple, sleek and streamlined, built for speed and efficiency. Expensive, too, but it was my Christmas gift, so that was alright. At this store, they were more than willing to let me try out the bike outside, and I whizzed down the sidewalk, water streaming behind me. We bought the bike, and stayed to chat a while with the man at the counter, whose eyes were friendly, and welcoming. He hoped I'd enjoy my bike.

I haven't gotten to, yet.

It's safe to say that things began to get worse after that Christmas. Before it had been fatigue, dizziness, vertigo, and the constant headaches. Other symptoms started after that, like the nausea, my constant companion, the grey mass of cement I carry around with me. The nausea has stolen my joy in eating with my family, because I know eating will only make it



worse.

I got up in the middle of the night once, heading to the bathroom, sure I was going to be sick, and fainted on the dining room floor. My mum heard the crash, and came running. She found me sprawled on the floor, still, my flashlight shining in my face.

The tachycardia increased, and the heart palpitations; I felt like my chest would bust open at any moment. I was kept awake at night by the throb of my own pulse. My balance disappeared; I began crashing into things, misjudging doorways and hitting into walls. My brain filled with fog; thick, cloying fog that has barely lifted since.

And then the pain began. The joint pain, the wobbling looseness, the popping out of place. The pain so terrible I can't sleep at night, the pain that makes it impossible to sit in any position for long. The nerve pain snaking through my fingers, destroying my dexterity. The chronic, unforgiving, unforgettable pain that is my reality.

That bike is still brand new, and I've been sick now for over a year. Doctors didn't know what to do with me. Bloodwork came back normal; I was misdiagnosed, referred to psych, and ignored. I lived in my own personal little hell.

And then we found someone. A doctor who listened, believed, and had an answer. My diagnoses are Chronic Lyme Disease and Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome, a disorder of the autonomic nervous system.

Knowing what's wrong with me is an incredible relief, but it doesn't change the fact that my life has turned upside-down. I've spent most of this past year in bed. Struggling through each day, trying to live despite the pain, looking only as far as tomorrow because I can't see much further. That's the way I've learned to cope.

I just have to make it to tomorrow.

And I do. It hurts and it's messy, but I always make it to tomorrow.

I know what I want for Christmas this year. I want to be normal again. I want to snap my fingers and have my life back.

It isn't that easy.

Every day is a battle, but I'm finally starting to feel like it's a war I can win. I've decided that it's a war I have to win. Win or go mad. Get my life back or sit, passive, as it is wasted. I can't let that happen. There's so much I want to do.

I'm on a path to recovery now. I'm in treatment, and things are looking more hopeful than they have in a long time. I no longer spend every day in bed. I'm walking, reading, writing. I'm starting to live again.

Every day it gets a little easier to make it to tomorrow.

Maybe next Christmas I'll be riding that bike.



December in Delhi Vanilla (India)

December 2015.

Winter is not good for a polluted city like mine. December, being the main month of winter in India, is always the coldest.

All things in nature huddle together in winter, trying to find, or steal, some warmth from the other.

The clouds creep towards the ground. The fog and the smoke meet and embrace, and together try to steal the little sunlight before it touches the earth. The smog becomes denser, trying to wrap the earth in a heavier, grayish blanket, like the people sleeping in woolen quilts in their homes. Evening darkness approaches faster than before, as if the smog did succeed in robbing the sunlight. Even after twilight, the smog refuses to diffuse. The air becomes thicker, but the world puts on an old, dull, sweater and wraps a muffler around its neck and walks on.

Some evenings, it coughs and some mornings, it can see its breath. But most days, it can't peer into the distance.

This year, my father decided to travel to escape the harsh winters. 'Migration over hibernation' he called it and 'Better to get the sun somewhere than get closer to that old, rusty heater at home' is what he said. We decide to journey to the western coast around Mumbai by train. Indian Railways was a part of family, as all cross-country trips; from Himalayan foothills to the Rajasthani deserts, were made by train.

As we take a cab to the New Delhi railway station, the moon is rising. The moon is a blurred piece of white in the black sky, clouds and smog. The street lights, though, filter through this, illuminating every speck of dust. The cars zoom past on the highway.

One can rarely see stars in my city.

We are sitting on the platform bench, (except me, who is sitting on a suitcase due to lack of



space). The station is mostly grey walls and wide pillars and overhead bridges connecting different platforms. Tangled electrical wires hang across the platform roofs. Numerous white tube lights glow along the roof, with the occasional digital clock providing the time in red numbers. People walk along, focused only on the information boards.

I hug the plastic cup of hot tea closer, my cold fingers desperately trying to steal its heat. The tea seller at the station has a very successful business, compared to the other newspaper stands and food stalls, as people surround him to get a cup or half of hot tea – ‘hot’ being the key word.

As it seems, this smog even intimidates mighty vehicles. Most of the trains crawl slowly through this haze, like a man walking towards a cliff. Some trains even get cancelled during denser days, preventing others from meeting their families and some from meeting their goals.

Our train is three hours late.

December is always cold. Cold is absence of heat. Heat, is scientifically energy, which is the capacity to do work. No wonder that people in December are lazy. The sun is lazy, shining lightly, rising later and setting earlier, perhaps trying to sleep in.

Probably the train driver is lazy too. Along with the tea seller who is now reducing the amount of tea in the cup, and the station announcer, who has stopped with the blaring (indistinguishable?) announcements. Even the porters, or 'coolies', dressed in their crimson uniform are taking a nap in their dusty black blankets on their ramps. Some of them are sitting against the grey, tobacco-stained pillar, warming their hands in a fire.

My mother makes polite conversation with a lady sitting across, while my father is busy reading the paper and swatting mosquitoes at the same time. The platform is almost crowded with passengers and impatience. After a few minutes of rare silence, all heads turn towards an old woman in a sari, sitting on the bench adjacent to ours. She is passing the box of 'gajrela', a sweet dish of red carrots that are available only in winter. A sweet aroma drifts all around. My mouth waters, but I quickly look away to alleviate the temptation.

December has truly arrived.

December. The word itself brings on a sense of finality. The rolling year slows down; giving time



for the fact to sink in that it is closing. The years are like chapters, each one different but advancing the life, the story forward. December is the last line and the remaining blank space on a page, before you turn it to begin the next chapter.

It is also a month full of celebration. Celebration of the end or the start, I am not sure. They celebrate if they have a good year, trying to elongate it, the hopeful feeling at the end of a good chapter. They celebrate if they have a bad year, trying to forget it, the eager and tensed feeling at the end of a sad chapter. Who doesn't want to start the new year fresh and clean? Either way, the closing is celebrated, because hope never dies for humans.

Just as hope hasn't died for the people sitting here, waiting for the late train.

When the Rajdhani Express finally arrives, the station fills with frenzy and smiles and sighs. Porters stand to attention as fathers get up carrying their luggage, and mothers, their kids. People align themselves with their compartments and start boarding. The happiness of the arrival of a late train is contagious, spreading quickly around the platform.

The wait is finally over. The last train of the night has finally arrived. The last month of the year has finally arrived. They are both going to depart soon. People zealously lift their bags to move on to another chapter, eager to know what happens next.

Footnotes: This was one of my experiences of December, as my family waited for a train for three hours on the station at night, which was delayed due to fog (or smog).

Christmas Rain ALangford (UK)

Last December, and the December before that, and all of the Decembers I can really remember, there has been only hail. No snow, never any snow, but always relentless hail. Without snow, I think you lose something of Christmas - for me, building snowmen, making angels, family snowball fights - they're all dim remembrances, things that could have happened but that equally I could have made up in my head. We used to follow footprints, bird prints in the snow, things from the past that we wanted to trace - nothing was ever too small. I have this image in



my head of my mum smiling, really smiling (and it was rare that she did that) as she watched me with my red mittens and shock of soot black hair on my third Christmas, placing my hands in the marks that my brothers hollowed out with their pounding feet on the ground. But it was a heavy smile, a reminder of what could have been for her, but what never was. It reminds me, thinking of that, of lucky I am to have her, this mother who has had a life marked with loneliness, who never had a path to follow.

I've gone off track. I'm meant to be talking about the rain at Christmas. So, every winter, as we didn't have the snow to play in, we would go out into town, drenched but smiling, convinced that we were endowed with the 'festive spirit', then we would go and sit in a coffee shop where we found we had nothing to say. We lasted a few minutes, maybe, then a phone would come out, then a book, and my mum would hear the faint 'ting' of her messages, desperate for attention. Beneath every warmed eyelid there were a million work emails hollering, in each clenched fist there was a yearning for essay-writing, for studying itching to be done. Then me, the young one, trying to make eye contact. It always happened like that, me sitting there, searching for familiarity, for comfort, and finding none.

On the way home, I would look at each house and imagine each of them splitting open, white lightning wounds straight through their centres, fissures a thousand miles deep into the fabric of reality. Inside these cracks the rain would pour in and soak them all too. Drip. Drip. Drip.

When we got home about three Decembers ago from this annual family excursion, my dad decided he needed some cash off his card, so he set out again and I watched him walking down the street, his figure becoming more blurred with every step until finally I could not recognise him.

He walked to the cashpoint and he looked up and it began to snow, not for us at home, but just for him, one little patch of cloud dropping white caresses onto his weathered face. He thought of taking it back to us, but whenever he tried to pick it up and carry it it went brown, like sludge, like the earth's decay. He reached the doorway of the bank and tapped his pin into the machine. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Then he bent over and placed his palm against the white surface of the ground beneath his feet, felt its smooth kiss on his skin like white wine on his lips.

He straightened up, caught sight of the Polish shop on the corner, the only one open on Christmas day, and he took the cash out of the machine. The air stank around him, the sickly



stench of a corrupt city, a corrupt world - they felt like lead on his eyelids. His footprints made marks in the snow like tar. He didn't remember himself walking there but suddenly he was through the glass doors and into the warmth, the bell singing softly behind him: ding. Ding. Ding.

He noted the vulgar brashness of the sign: 'ALCOHOL' emblazoned in bold black, hanging from the screeed ceiling. His hand brushed against the disarray of colours, the cold aluminium holding liquid gold he could imagine pouring down his throat like honey, like forbidden fruit, and he picked up one, or two, or three. Refreshment for the journey home, or so he thought. At the counter, he noted the price ('£9.50 please, sir') but did not object - the world had always charged him too much. He didn't see the point in making a fuss. It never made a difference.

Outside, he looked around in every direction, trying to find his way home. The footprints he had made in the snow melted away into the millions of layers of the earth. He started walking, tentatively at first, one foot at a time, into the winter evening, the darkness that conceals everything that wants to be concealed.

We went out looking for him in the car. The condensation made a thin mist on my window, and I wrote his name in it a thousand times: dad. Dad. Dad. It felt like a game to me, spotting men and shouting, only to realise they weren't him. It was only when we pulled back into our drive, felt the gravel crunching a hundred miles beneath us, that it struck me that it was real. He was Gone.

For every Christmas since, we've sat in our sitting room and watched the hail. As I've grown older, I've started to take annual trips: to the cashpoint, to the Polish shop, feeling my knuckles against the silver, then away in any direction that takes my fancy, as though I could travel through the years and bring my dad back to us. I always end up walking home empty-handed. A failure.

Just like Christmas, some events are supposed to bring you together, but somehow we ended up further apart. Night after night, I dream of the snow falling again, so I can open the hatch and bring noise into my silent home, then crawl out, heart first, and be cleansed.

