Creative Nonfiction:
Exemplars from the Write the World Archives

Searching for a better understanding 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!

The Rain and the Reverie
Tula Singer (Cuba)

My mother came into the kitchen with a blank face. I was sitting at the table, having a toast with olive oil and cheese and a glass of cold water. “We’re leaving,” she said, and sat on the chair across from me. “We’re going to move in with Ahmad in New York.”

I set my glass of water down and hid a couple of tears. “What?”

“I am tired of Cuba, mi amor. I can’t anymore. I’m tired of going to millions of stores just to get detergent or tomato paste or butter . . . of waiting months to eat an egg or a piece of cheese. But why are you so surprised? When we first moved here I told you and your sister that it would only be for four years at the most. Weren’t you expecting it?” She crossed her legs and sighed, pausing. “I’ve found a good school for Carla and you in New York. New York is a beautiful city.”

I looked at the closed window.

“We’ll be able to go shopping, we’ll have internet, we’ll be able to eat what we want when we want. Living here has been an interesting adventure—it has ended now.”

As she spoke I listened to the rest of the city. It was Sunday afternoon; women chatted on their balconies with a coffee and a bizcocho, men played dominó on the sidewalk and yelled at the children kicking a football around in the street. The day was calm, the sky was gray, the ocean was quiet. I listened closer.

“Will we come back?”

“I have to come back in September to finish building the apartment in La Habana Vieja, so that we can start renting it as soon as possible . . . they’re polishing the floors now, the apartment is almost done. I’ll show you pictures later . . . I think I took some. If you’re not in school then maybe you can come, mi vida.”

“Why do you have to be so cold about it?”

“I’m not being cold. We have to leave. We have to leave.”

I felt a great chill in my arms as a breeze flung the balcony doors open. Then the sky burst, and little blue bits started pelting the roof, the sidewalk, the trees, the people. Everybody went inside except the stray cats, dogs, and chickens, who hid beneath buildings and bushes. I stood to close the windows and the balcony as the wind swept rain into the living room the way a broom sweeps things like hair and dirt. My mother sat and watched and tilted her head as I closed the white wood planks with the lever.

“Don’t slam the windows,” she said, sitting down at the table and taking a bite out of my bread. “You’ll break them.”

I sat back down at the table and drank the rest of my water, thirsty.

“How do you feel?”

“Like the rain,” I said as the rain came down.

“Did I tell you that I dreamt of Abuelo last night?”

“No.”

“We were walking in the woods. It was a beautiful place, with flowers and trees and mushrooms, the kind of raw place I wish I could be in all the time. We were strolling and there was nothing to say. The sky was gray and dark and sad and everything was dry, but although it looked like it was about to rain it never would.”

My grandfather, with his gray goatee beard and his old frown, lived in my memory like a balloon. After he died I dreamt of him once, as I was in a sort of restless state; in a black place he lit a candle, and I saw his face behind the yellowness, and then the light faded and so did his face and the dream was gone.

“I asked him: where will we go? And I asked him at least four times, and he looked down at me, somewhat remote, and didn’t say anything. He never says anything when I dream about him.”

She sat there thinking about the dream and I was there with her—I saw the dry trees and the flooded sky and the squirrel hide behind a bush with an acorn; I felt the breeze, the rich smells, the silence. I was there.

“He didn’t say anything, he never says anything in my dreams.” She looked back at me. Her eyes were like two black nectarines, standing out among her other features: the shadowy hair, the twisted lips, the elegant neck. “And as we walked, I remembered that he was letting me know that he was with me. I remembered, because he always does this. He always comes. I should have expected him—the apartment in La Habana Vieja, the move, the struggles at work—he always comes when everything else comes all at once.” She bit her thumb regretfully and pulled her feet up to the chair, hugging her knees.

“He’s been a great dead father.”

“Yes.” She smiled. “As we walked, he held my hand. When it fell a little loose he looked down at me and squeezed it a little tighter as we walked together in the woods, together, going nowhere. Nowhere, because I can’t remember what was in front of us, behind us, we were going nowhere.”

I got up and served myself more water and drank half of it and then filled the glass again to the top. My mother looked at her feet as she scratched her arm, confused. The unfinished bread sat in the middle of the table.

“Yes,” she said. “He always comes. At first he visited me more often. Then he went away for a while. Last night he came back, he knew he needed to protect me, and he still has nothing to say but he wanted to tell me that he knew.” Outside, the wind slammed against the windows and the doors, waving the thin rain around—a puppet. “And Abuela, and Tío Roberto, they never dream about him. After he died Abuela never got to see him again, and I know that she still goes to bed hoping that he’ll be there when she falls asleep. She never sees him.”

She nodded. I nodded. I didn’t either.

“‘Where are we going?’ I said to him. He never said anything. He never says anything. I’ve almost forgotten what his voice sounds like.” She paused for a few seconds as a door slammed somewhere in the house, subjected to the wind. “Sometimes, when I was young, when I would sit on the porch with my friends, he would come out and sit with us, drinking his beer, and then he would offer them a beer, and everybody adored him. He was so impatient and hurtful when he was angry but everybody who didn’t know him like I did adored him. I adored him too, sometimes. When I was little, when I was living here in Cuba, in Santa Fé, he used to save the plums especially for me, and he would hide them from everybody else so that I could eat them, because it’s so hard to get plums here. Then he would give them to me and smile as I ate. The memory is so sweet and delicious. He would always smile and the fruit tasted like heaven because in a minute it was gone.”

I drank more water. I knew the stories. I had heard them a thousand times before. My handful of moments with him came to life in my head occasionally, somewhat like music: when he pretended to be a wolf as I hid in the hammock, expecting him; when I showed him how I could write “Abuelo”; when we waited for the train to come, eagerly, and then ran out to the road to see it rush by in ten seconds. After he died, everytime I stayed with my grandmother, everytime I heard the train, I saw him in it, and then the train would go and so would he.

The rain slowed down, tired like the afternoon. The afternoon was never impatient like the rain. I bit my lip.

“What day do we leave?” I said, and then the sky was a great ocean.

The Supper Club
Nausicaa Chu (US)

Flames

The man with the flamethrower is in the house.

To be more specific, he is in the backyard shooting a three foot pillar of blue flame in the relative direction of our undergrowth.

Is this unexpected? Yes. If anyone had shown up on my doorstep at 8:00 at night with a weed flamethrower and a tank of petrel, it would be hard not to be surprised.

Is this unwanted? Not particularly.

Is this an anomaly? No. Certainly not for the man who brought it, or the man cackling next to him as fire and smoke fill the air.

Who in the world are these people? The man with the flamethrower in question is Uncle Jim, ironically the only burn surgeon in the state of Alabama, and the cackling guy beside him is my dad, a colorectal surgeon.

The flamethrower is carefully put away beside the Big Green Egg, a grill that looks like its name, and the gaucho grill, a moving metal slab attached to a rotisserie stick above a coal-filled grate.

Sparks

The invitations are sent out via text. Six o'clock, our house.

It's six thirty. I balance cans of sparkling water in my arms and dump them on the counter, set out knives and chopsticks and spoons, adjust bowls of fruit in the middle of the table.

Nobody's here yet, but that's normal. "Whenever we say six, everyone knows we mean six thirty," my mom explained to me one time. "You're supposed to be late to parties."

The Yings are the first to arrive. Their two kids run upstairs to play minecraft on the Nintendo with my brother, while Auntie Quyen runs upstairs to help my mom around the kitchen, and Uncle Yedah goes around to the backyard where dad is grilling. Warm smoke and the smell of steak fills the house.

Auntie Quyen and Uncle Yedah, and all the other people at the dinner, are not actually my aunt and uncle, but it's customary in Asian culture to address close family friends as such.

The Hwangs come in next. They live right up the street, and our dogs, Teto and Ranger, get along well. The dogs run to the backyard to romp and play, and try and fail to get a bite of meat. Auntie In-suk brings Korean vegetables and noodles, and Uncle Jim joins the men in the backyard.

The Wangs come too. Auntie Janet helps Mom prepare vegetables while Uncle Tom asks, "chess?" and I pull out the board and smush the flabby defense he calls the Sicilian. It really isn't anything of the sort.

Uncle George comes in and heads to the garage with my dad to pick out wine to go with dinner.

I carry trays of smoking meat and grilled vegetables inside, pausing as I hear the rush of the flamethrower shooting fire at the rotisserie duck in my dad's ever-going quest to achieve crispy duck skin. My dad carries the duck inside, darkened to a charred bronze, and everyone sits or stands around the counter and talks and eats.

The conversation flows easily, as it always does. There is a script to it, a rhythm, a comforting familiarity.

Usually part of the dialogue covers how this conglomeration of Asian people came together in the first place.

"When did we start having dinners like this? Because we came down, and then–" Uncle Yedah begins.

"Yeah, I mean, the Supper Club didn't really start happening until the Yings came down to Birmingham, and then the Hwangs. Before that, the only Asian people at the hospital were Ben [another one of my dad's colleagues] and the Wangs," my dad says.

"It was the pandemic that did it," my mom says, "All the restaurants were closed, there was nothing else to do."

"But seriously, I think the food we cook here is the best Asian food in Birmingham. It's better than all the restaurants in the area," Uncle Jim says.

Auntie In-suk laughs. "We should start our own restaurant."

"One day, when we're all retired maybe," my mom agrees.

There is a thoughtful pause, and people get more food.

“We probably had to get together eventually. We’re, like, the only Asians in Alabama. There wouldn’t be anyone to celebrate Chinese New Years with otherwise,” my mom jokes.

Uncle George sits quietly and sips his wine, sometimes inserting a witty remark into the conversation. But I think that perhaps he brought the Supper Club most together, more even than the Pandemic.

Embers

A year, maybe more, maybe less, after the flamethrower, people line the hallways of our house, at least twenty or thirty, looking strangely solemn for a dinner party. Not all of them are from the Supper Club, most of them work at the hospital, but all of them know the man walking with his wife between the two lines of people.

I know him as my Uncle George, but others know him as a doctor, a colleague, a mentor, a friend. He is my dad’s friend and also my dad’s patient.

After Uncle George was diagnosed with cancer, he was enveloped into the Supper Club. He won the Dumpling Competition we had a couple months earlier, almost won the Fried Rice Competition, and was a principal judge of the Galbi Competition. He was an excellent connoisseur of food and wine, and a huge part of the Supper Club. A lot of the dinners we had, we had for him.

The year or so we had with Uncle George was a wonderful time. But the cancer took a turn for the worse, and he decided to move with his wife to the west coast.

In the hallway, people cry and say goodbye. I am near the end of the hallway by the door, and we embrace for the last time. I don't know what to say to him. Unlike the dinner parties, there is no script for this, no well-worn dialogue. There is nothing to say, except "thank you, thank you for everything."

Uncle George dies a few weeks later, but the legacy and the memories and influence he leaves with the Supper Club lives on.

Uncle George showed the Supper Club the values of our Asian culture, our community, and he showed us to cherish what we have: the relationships that are really important in life. Things change all the time – the Wangs moved to California, the Huangs and the Kristens moved to Alabama and became part of the Supper Club – but what never changes is the importance of community and traditions in all the uncertainties of life.

As I transition through my teenage years, Uncle George's lessons and the Supper Club's lessons have stayed with me. I grew up in the Club – it was kind of like growing up in a big, big family. I learned that a few solid friends around you can make all the difference, that culture is something to celebrate, that a community of people can teach you more than you will ever discover on your own. And I also learned that in all the transitions of life, all the change that happens, the relationships you have with those around you will ground you, will shape you, will become part of your identity.

The narrative of the Club is still continuing, and I am so, so glad that my own narrative is intertwined with it.

Blaze

A couple months after that final dinner with Uncle George, there is a package on the doorstep.

The package contains something that could only be described as a Flamethrower 2.0, grandly entitled a flambadou – essentially an iron cone attached to a handle into which you pour hot wax and light on fire to create a jet of flame.

Is this unexpected? Yes.

Is this unwanted? Not particularly.

Is this an anomaly? Not at all. At this point, it's completely normal.

Who in the world would buy this thing?

Take a guess.

A Taken Seat at an Empty Table
Amalia Costa (UK)

My job is trifle.
My job is potatoes.
My job is drinks.
My job is table.

Plate, knife, fork, spoon, glass, napkin, cracker.
Repeat sixteen times.

They file in at about eleven, all beaming and flushed from the London chill, milling in through the door and planting kisses on cheeks and presents in arms, while Mum whisks about the kitchen. She darts her head into the living room from time to time with a "dinner will be ready in ten minutes" expression on her face.

My brother, my sister, and I circle the dining room, kitchen, and living room in an elegantly frantic waltz; three rooms, three siblings. Three minutes per room seems to be the perfect average before we switch duties. We're a good team. We hardly see each other.

Directing people to the table is a task that requires a tactful yet dynamic hand; Bappou Tony and Bappou Costa have both, by this point, sunk into their respective favourite spots on our sofa, and the slightest suggestion of moving elicits uproars from both of them, laden with Cypriot expletives, that warn us that they're not to be trifled with. They're harmless, really. Old bones, old ways, Yiayia Anna winks conspiratorially at us ladies as they eventually grumble their way to the table.

I soon realise my mistake. So does everyone else, but no one says anything. England has smoothed our edges, clipped our tongues. We act just like the Englishmen do with their families now. Like we're strangers.

The space looms, a fray in the rope of cramped relatives braided haphazardly around the table. From time to time I glimpse an aunt or uncle, trapped between neighbouring elbows, gaze wistfully at the empty chair, then lower their eyes as if in shame. It's my fault. I always set for sixteen.

Mum's smile is a corkscrew. It twinges in my chest. I fix my eyes ahead on the million streaks of feathery sleet that marble the glass pane of the back door. Boxed in and blurry is the world now, framed by a string of cheap Christmas lights and wilting red tinsel Blu-tacked to the door in the shape of a heart. The murmur of small talk commences.

We act like we're pleasantly thrust together by circumstance instead of a family bound by flesh and blood and grief and love. Polite, superficial questions are passed around the table along with the parsnips.

Before long, a lull arises.

Mum's eyes begin to strain at the corners. Dad pops into the kitchen to connect his music to the Bluetooth speaker "for a bit of background," he says. We let out a collective sound of vague assent. I catch my reflection in the doorframe. I still have my smile on, one that all of us borrow from Mum when she requires a deputy. Warm, accommodating. A hostess smile. Now it sits clumsily on my lips, so I dab it off with a napkin and rearrange my face.

"Last Christmas" bleeds into the room from the kitchen, tinny and distant. Suddenly, Bappou Tony strikes up an inflammatory discussion about Brexit with Bappou Costa at the other end of the table, and we're helpless to stop it. Ever the diplomat, my father's father waits patiently for his bethero's passionate monologue to end so that he can inform him that they are, in fact, both on the same side. Bappou Tony sits quietly for a minute, then tosses his hands in the air dismissively and barks for more potatoes.

My brother and sister both catch my eye. He's much worse than last year, our faces write to each other while we eat. What did we expect?

A consummate diva, my mother's father, always looking for an excuse to play his trusty harmonica, or to sing Cypriot folk songs in his booming voice. A flighty temper he has too, so we didn't notice his mood swings until he began forgetting our names. A complete contrast to my Yiayia Rita, grounded and constant as only a sole sister to five brothers could have been. As only a wife to my grandfather could have been. Was.

She is sitting in the empty chair, opposite her daughter whose smile is a corkscrew. Which twinges in my chest.
I never thought they looked alike. They do now.

My aunt Maria timidly shifts halfway onto the chair to better hear my uncle Odysseus. She shuffles from side to side and side to side and side to side. I feel like screaming to her, "Just sit on the chair for goodness sake." She concedes defeat after a while and slides back onto her original seat. She turns to my sister cheerfully and strikes up a separate conversation. Anna's much closer in proximity to her, thank the Lord.

I chastise myself for my silent tantrum. What would Yiayia say?

She would have made Charlotta, a traditional trifle from our ancestral village, from candied orange peel. It's impossible to make it well. I cringe at the thought of how my paltry effort will be received.

Dinner is soon over. We carry armfuls of plates to the kitchen, piling them in the sink. The others file back to the living room. Greasy, bloated remains are scraped into the food bin while I hoist the enormous glass bowl delicately from the fridge with my forearms.

"Thank you ayabi mou," Mum says, wiping her hands on a towel.

"No worries."

She is silent. She turns to me and smiles our shared hostess smile. The one that doesn't reach the eyes.

"It'll get easier," I offer, feeling stupid. The trifle feels heavier by the minute.

The smile is gone. She looks so much younger. She looks so much older too.

She looks like my Yiayia.

"Call everyone in for dessert before it curdles, ayabi mou," she says gently.

My job is trifle. My job is trivial.

I put on my smile.

A Beloved Tradition and a Father I Never Knew
Elena Zhang (US)

Part I: Coin Dumplings

As a family tradition for the New Years, a coin would be hidden inside one of the dumplings, and the “lucky one” who discovered the coin would be granted a wish. Since the first New Year I could recall, my family would start the festival with the ritual of coin dumplings. We mixed pork and chives in a bowl, floured the dumpling wrappers, and enclosed the perfect amount of filling.

Once everyone was seated, Dad bent over the table to distribute dumplings to everyone and Mom hated how performative it was. We devoured our plates, swallowing whole dumplings in one bite, fiercely competing to find the gold coin. As the soft shell of each

dumpling melted in my mouth, I relished the salty flavor of the garlic, the hot sensation of the soup, and the warmth not only from the dumpling, but also from my family. On my tenth, or maybe thirtieth dumpling, I felt a solid substance in between the fillings. My tongue instantly recognized that telltale texture. It was me– I found the gold coin! In awe of my luck, my eyes popped as the rest of my family jokingly envied my triumph. I instinctively shut my eyes, wishing for Dad to stay home. It seemed as if fate bestowed me that coin, allowing me to keep dad by my side. That night, I hid the coin under my pillow as a reminder that Dad was close by.

Just weeks after the celebration, I scoffed at my short-lived fantasy. When Dad went away for work again, I went back to my familiar image of him: his perfectly made, untouched bed and stale cigarette butts he left in the ashtray.

He had mostly been absent in my childhood, always away on his business outings. Every time he would return, his comments revealed our time apart. "You've grown so much!" or "Your hair got longer!" He would play folk songs on the piano with his right index finger and hum along off-key. He was the parent who interrupted my musical due to his tardiness, and the one who clapped at the wrong times. Above all, I remember the feeling of falling into his hugs and being lifted up and down.

Every time before he left, he would plant a big kiss on my cheek.

“I promise we will spend time in the summer together. We will go to the beach just as you want.” Here once again, his words conjured visions when things would be perfect again. I waited for him to go before wiping off the residue of saliva he left on my face.

Part II: Melting Icecream

On a scorching August afternoon in 2014, a day I have longed for since the New Years, we were headed to the airport for our promised summer getaway. I was seven years old, bouncing up and down on the seat as I rambled about what to do on the beach. Suddenly, a faint sound of sirens approached from behind, and the unmistakable flash

of red and blue lights filled the car windows. Before I realized it was for us, the police had already pulled our car on the roadside. The ice cream in my left hand melted in the heat and the chocolate dripped down from my palm to my wrist. My sister raised her eyes and we exchanged a troubled glance. The concern on her face was recognizable, an expression I knew well. Then, through the rearview mirror, I saw three officers knocking on the window of the driver's seat, signaling Dad to step out. My initial thought was that Dad had been speeding again. However, the officers led him over to the police car, and he didn't even glance back at us as they motioned him inside. I looked back and forth between my mom and sister, hoping that they would have some explanation, but their eyes met mine with just as much confusion. The ice cream, forgotten, was now all over my forearm.

As days of no news passed after Dad's unannounced departure, my apprehension piled up. I tried to tell myself that this was normal: that he was gone for business outings as usual, that he'd broken our promise the way he had always done, and that he'd turn up one night for dinner, hair gelled back, smelling like he just got off a plane ride.

But that day never came. Riding home from school on a Thursday evening, I pulled out my phone to check the news I had subscribed to earlier that week. My eyes stopped upon an article, and chills shot up my spine. I gasped as I read the words in the heading, "ACCUSED," following my dad's name. With my fingers shaking uncontrollably, I scrolled through the report, hoping that this wasn't my father, that this wasn't real.

As soon as I got home, I ran to my mom for confirmation.

"Is there something I should know?" I asked with my voice shaking. Before my mom could process my question, I pulled out the article and read the headline loudly, emphasizing every word.

"I'm sorry…I didn't know how to tell you and your sister." My mom muttered but her words were laden with hesitation. My head buzzed and my skin was cold and sweaty. Before I knew, tears were uncontrollably streaming down my face.

I collapsed into my mom's arms. "God, how?"

Part III: A Curse and a Blessing

Waiting is one of the most painful experiences, not because of time, but the expectations that come with it. Seven years after the incident, the concept of fatherhood became more obscure. Every so often, memories of my dad will return in the oddest ways, catching a glimpse of smoke from the kitchen, suits at a storefront, hair gel in the supermarket. But he no longer felt real.

During every New Year's night that proceeded, I developed an aversion to dumplings, fearing the taste would bring me back to my foolish childhood fantasy. I no longer dreamt of summer vacations, no longer had chocolate ice cream, and no longer endowed my trust with any promises made.

As the summer before my freshman year of high school started, I was given a chance to make a phone call to my dad. Strangely, the feelings I experienced were like being called into the principal's office. My movement stiffened, and I was unable to form a chain of thought. But I had to pick up the phone and make that call. It was the only way for me to get some sort of closure to this chapter of my life. When he picked up the call, I watched as five seconds passed before either of us spoke a word. There was so much I wanted to say, but how could I have condensed seven years of emotion into one phone call? Words raced in and out of my mind but the only ones that broke the silence was: "Are you okay, dad?"

“Dad is all fine," he replied in a weak voice. We spoke briefly before my sister took over the phone and at the very least formulated something meaningful. Towards the end of the call, the two of us came together to say goodbye to him again.

I cried silently that night over his voice that I haven’t heard in years. He sounded like a stranger. At that moment, I realized the weight of the seven years wasn’t our time apart,

it was a gap that left so many words unspoken. Too few “I love you’s” and too many broken promises.

The phone call served as an end to my waiting, and a start to healing. I’ve accepted that pain is part and parcel of joy, and that this is love, and then there is everything else.

When the next New Year came, the tradition of coin dumplings continued. Hot steam carried the scent of dumplings through the house, reminding me of how much my family loved celebrations and new beginnings. This time, I wasn't the lucky one.

Despite that, I still made a wish.

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 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.