

Creative Writing Portfolio

Kayla Riggs

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Workshop #1: Fiction Draft

Do Not Disturb

Ellie stood. Her strawberry-blonde hair, kissed by the day's apprehensive sun, brushed against her neck and blew carefully in the wind. Beneath her, hoards of gravel and earth carefully avoided her white flats as strands of grass tickled her legs. A small, blue gown clung loosely to her skin, and a soft summer breeze wafted through the air, transforming the lonesome field of wildflowers in which she stood into an orchestra of flower petals and leaves, dancing cheerfully to the rhythm of the air.

Deliberately, Ellie turned her face to the sky and let the sun's soft light brighten her features. Her brilliant, forest-green eyes glimmered, and her lips turned upward, revealing pearly-white teeth and a cheeky grin. In the distance, a symphony of crickets and birds echoed blissfully throughout the meadow.

A dark, small object suddenly cast a shadow across Ellie's features. *Snap* The sound of a camera shutter disrupted the chirps that rung in her ears.

"You look a little *too* happy here," she heard her friend, Sam, say. "People won't like that. Try softening your smile."

Ellie stood, growing tired. Her strawberry-blonde hair, grasped by the day's omnipotent sun, awkwardly slapped her face and clung to the sides of her mouth. Beneath her, aggressive mounds of gravel and earth created an overpowering aroma of manure. Her shoes, which gripped and snagged at her skin, were surely being tarnished by the mud that sat beneath her. Buzz. A fly circled Ellie's ear, impatiently and relentlessly searching for the overpowering, pungent scent that filled the air. Buzz. She let out a slow sigh.

Lazily, Ellie moved her face to the sky. Beads of sweat trickled down her forehead from the sun's foreboding glare. Her eyes, still a brilliant shade of green, revealed a tiredness and a sadness that didn't seem to be there a minute ago. Buzz. The fly still circled her head and she began to swat the air around her. She hated her eyes. Slowly, almost as if right on cue, her brilliant and sad and tired and forest-green eyes filled with salty tears formed from the sky's brightness. Her lips, cracked from the dryness of the summer, turned only slightly upwards, revealing a smile that had been tarnished and worn from the world around her.

Snap The little, dark object clouded Ellie's vision once again as it was awkwardly held by Sam, who squinted to get a good look at the minuscule screen.

"Eh, I guess that's better. Maybe try a different pose?"

Again, Ellie stood. But this time, her hair didn't seem so sun-kissed and her eyes didn't seem so brilliant. Her legs were tired from standing so unnaturally and her mind was tired from pretending to care. She didn't even try to move her face toward the sun — which was now giving her a proper sunburn — and instead looked into the camera's all-knowing, judgemental lens.

Ellie wanted to disappear, to escape as quickly as the sun vanished from the sky, and become the hues of orange and pink that dot the clouds as dusk transcends into night. Because of that potent camera lens, Ellie was no one and everyone all at once. She was a figment, decades of expectations and standards breathed into life. She was the thousands of little girls and boys who looked at themselves in the mirror with critical, scrutinizing eyes.

She had to be *perfect*. But she wasn't.

How could she be? Ellie's life wasn't sunshine and wildflowers and a precariously placed gown. It wasn't sun-kissed hair and pearly-white teeth, not an orchestra of flower petals nor a symphony of chirping birds. But that's what she wanted them all to believe. And they did.

Really, Ellie drove. She drove to a field that looked picturesque and she stood. She stood in the unforgiving sun's heat and posed for a thousand pictures, all of which she ended up hating. Her skin wasn't clear enough, her teeth weren't white enough, her hair was messy — but not in a cute, fun way: it was tangled and knotted from a day filled with screens and fitting in and lying to ingenuine "how are you's". She was beaten down from the flurries of fake comments that engulfed her phone and the constant comparisons she made to girls who were skinnier, prettier, *better* than her. And, worst of all, she was profoundly uninspired, her eyes looked droopy with tiredness, and her face bore scars from her past while revealing bruises from her present.

So, this time, Ellie ran. Bending down, she removed her dirt-covered shoes, flinging them carelessly into the overgrown brush that surrounded her. She felt her legs move from underneath her ... and she ran and ran, the bare bottoms of her feet becoming muddy from the soil below her, her hair flowing wildly and knowingly behind her. Ellie ran, grinning and grimacing at the same time, hoping the problems that had once overwhelmed her, the issues that had once controlled her, would disappear under the sun's inevitable, critical glare. She leapt and danced, the clouds her only witness, and finally fell to the ground, throwing her arms up and staring at the still, unmoving sky above her.

Snap In the distance, Ellie heard a camera shutter and the faint sound of Sam's voice. "That was great; so candid! I got the perfect one."

And as much as she didn't want it to, a small smile unequivocally unfurled across Ellie's lips.

Workshop #1: Fiction Draft Revision

Snapshot

Ellie stood. Her strawberry-blonde hair, kissed by the day's apprehensive sun, brushed against her neck and blew carefully in the wind. Beneath her, hoards of gravel and earth carefully avoided her white flats as strands of grass tickled her legs. A small, blue gown clung loosely to her skin, and a soft summer breeze wafted through the air, transforming the lonesome field of wildflowers in which she stood into an orchestra of flower petals and leaves, dancing cheerfully to the rhythm of the air.

Deliberately, Ellie turned her face to the sky and let the sun's soft light brighten her features. Her brilliant, forest-green eyes glimmered, and her lips turned upward, revealing pearly-white teeth and a cheeky grin. In the distance, a symphony of crickets and birds echoed blissfully throughout the meadow.

A dark, small object suddenly cast a shadow across Ellie's features. *Snap* The sound of a camera shutter disrupted the chirps that rung in her ears.

"You look a little *too* happy here," she heard her friend, Sam, say. "People won't like that. Try a softer, quieter smile; one that's not so distinct."

Ellie stood, growing tired. Her strawberry-blonde hair, grasped by the day's omnipotent sun, awkwardly slapped her face and clung to the sides of her mouth. Beneath her, aggressive mounds of gravel and earth created an overpowering aroma of manure. Her shoes, which gripped

and snagged at her skin, were surely being tarnished by the mud that sat beneath her. Buzz. A fly circled Ellie's ear, impatiently and relentlessly searching for the overpowering, pungent scent that filled the air. Buzz. She let out a slow sigh.

Lazily, Ellie moved her face to the sky. Beads of sweat trickled down her forehead from the sun's foreboding glare. Her eyes, still a brilliant shade of green, revealed a tiredness and a sadness that didn't seem to be there a minute ago. Buzz. The fly still circled her head and she began to swat the air around her. She hated her eyes. Slowly, almost as if right on cue, her brilliant and sad and tired and forest-green eyes filled with salty tears formed from the sky's brightness. Her lips, cracked from the dryness of the summer, turned only slightly upwards, revealing a smile that had been tarnished and worn from the world around her.

Snap The little, dark object clouded Ellie's vision once again as it was awkwardly held by Sam, who squinted to get a good look at the minuscule screen.

"Eh, I guess that's better. Maybe try a different pose?"

Again, Ellie stood. But this time, her hair didn't seem so sun-kissed and her eyes didn't seem so brilliant. Her legs were tired from standing so unnaturally and her mind was tired from pretending to care. She didn't even try to move her face toward the sun — which was now giving her a proper sunburn — and instead looked into the camera's surely all-knowing, judgemental lens.

Ellie wanted to disappear, to escape as quickly as the sun vanishes from the sky, and become the hues of orange and pink that dot the clouds as dusk transcends into night. To that potent camera lens, Ellie was no one and everyone all at once. She was a figment, decades of

expectations and standards breathed into life. She was the thousands of little girls and boys who looked at themselves in the mirror with critical, scrutinizing eyes.

She had to be *perfect*. But she wasn't.

How could she be? Ellie's life wasn't sunshine and wildflowers and a precariously placed gown. It wasn't sun-kissed hair and pearly-white teeth, not an orchestra of flower petals nor a symphony of chirping birds. It wasn't *perfect*. But that's what she wanted them all to believe. And they did.

Really, Ellie stood in a place she thought looked picturesque and she shifted and moved clumsily in the unforgiving sun's heat, posing for a thousand pictures, all of which she ended up hating. Her skin wasn't clear enough, her teeth weren't white enough, her hair was messy — but not in a cute, beautiful way: it was tangled and knotted from a day filled with screens and fitting in and lying to ingenuine “how are you's.” She was beaten down from the flurries of fake comments that engulfed her phone and the constant comparisons she made to girls who were skinnier, prettier, *better* than her. And, worst of all, she was profoundly uninspired, her eyes looked droopy with tiredness, and her face bore scars from her past while revealing bruises from her present. She was tired of standing, tired of *being*.

So, this time, Ellie ran. Bending down, she removed her dirt-covered shoes, flinging them carelessly into the overgrown brush that surrounded her. She felt her legs move from underneath her ... and she ran and ran, the bare bottoms of her feet becoming muddy from the soil below her, her hair flowing wildly and knowingly behind her. Ellie ran, grinning and grimacing at the same time, hoping the problems that had once overwhelmed her, the issues that had once controlled her, would disappear under the sun's inevitable, critical glare. She leapt and danced,

the clouds her only witness, and finally fell to the ground, throwing her arms up and staring at the still, unmoving sky above her.

Snap In the distance, Ellie heard a camera shutter and the faint sound of Sam’s voice. “That was great; so candid! I got the perfect one.”

And as much as she didn’t want it to, a small smile unfurled across Ellie’s lips.

Analysis of Growth and Improvement on Fiction

Surprisingly, this workshop perhaps came the easiest to me of the three we completed this semester. This could in part be attributed to a document I created a few years back entitled “The Song Chronicles,” on which I wrote short stories inspired by songs and the emotions they can conjure. About a year ago, I had started writing about a character named Ellie after listening to “The Gun Song” by The Lumineers — but I never finished it. This creative fiction piece was my way of completing the story — with some new themes and ideas — for Ellie and for myself after a chaotic, grounding year.

This workshop was also the one that required the least amount of edits in terms of content; throughout this revision, I mainly changed the phrasing and diction of some paragraphs to increase clarity. In the last repetition (or “snapshot”), I changed the beginning of the iteration, removing “she drove” from the first sentence. Because the story did not mention how Ellie got to the field to take pictures, beginning the final — and perhaps most important repetition — with the suggestion that she drove there seemed out of place and irrelevant to the story overall. Thus, I opted to align with the previous repetitions, starting the passage with “she stood” instead. Moreover, I altered the title of the piece, changing it from “Do Not Disturb” to “Snapshot” to better represent the piece in its entirety; I wanted “snapshot” to resemble the shutter of a camera,

but to also be reminiscent of social media sites like “Snapchat” that can have negative impacts on users’ body image. I also altered some of the punctuation and language of the story. In the first repetition, I slightly changed Sam’s dialogue to eradicate any confusion regarding “softening” Ellie’s smile, as this can have a positive connotation — but was meant to be negative. The last paragraph of the third repetition was also slightly changed, as I explicitly used the word “perfect” to describe what Ellie wanted her life to be, even though it was anything but that. Finally, I chose to italicize certain words to stress their importance, such as “being” in the line, “She was tired of standing, tired of *being*. ”

Overall, I found that most of my growth in creative fiction came from paying greater attention to detail, particularly in the language I chose to use. Often, seemingly minor details can get lost when initially writing a story; having the time to review my work, looking carefully at each sentence, is a practice that I enjoyed and want to implement more often in any piece of writing I complete. Generally speaking, I also think that I was able to employ vivid descriptions well in this workshop particularly, which helped set the varying tones for each repetition; using flowery, vibrant language is something I enjoy, but can still, of course, be refined moving forward.

Knowing this, there are an abundance of other components that I can also improve upon as I progress in creative fiction writing. I believe that I can do a better job of developing specific characters more thoroughly and completely; however, because this piece was more focused on various iterations of the same story, this sentiment was seemingly not as important as in other pieces of fiction writing. Moreover, similarly to my creative nonfiction piece, I feel as though I can improve my plot-building techniques, primarily through increasing the amount of dialogue in the story. Though description is something I use often, it can sometimes take the place of plot,

which can be problematic in some pieces. Creatively speaking, I'd like to go outside of my comfort zone in terms of story topics and themes; it would certainly be interesting to write a thriller or horror-esque piece! Ultimately, however, I'm excited to continue writing creative fiction — whether in school or on my own — and I'm looking forward to trying different techniques, genres, and styles within my work.

Workshop #2: Poetry Writing Draft

Charlie Brown:

Multidimensional Freeform



I miss watching Charlie Brown —
 And carelessly dragging my tattered, ragged blanket
 Just like Linus did, across a dirt- and PB&J- stained floor littered with
 An obnoxious amount of toys
 Worn and loved only by the two of us

It's strange — the way we can so easily forget
 The old, barely-standing bookcase, our most cherished games —
 The way we used to sit and stare, fixated, at characters in a show
 That pre-dated even us

Learning to ignore things is one of the great paths to inner peace

You used to play sports just as Lucy did,
Competitively calculating your next move
And I was Charlie Brown,
Innocently obliging, your biggest fan
Life has no remote

Anger consumes me, tears and snags at me
It's the anger of being thrown ruthlessly into this peculiar unnerving
Thing people seem to hate, to despise, to attack —
This thing called adulthood
You've heard of the fury of a woman scorned, haven't you?

We're tossed, carelessly, without another thought
Into a whirlwind of unpaid bills and limitless obligation,
Of "how's your job" instead of "how are you"
— now we're stuck in the hazy cloud that followed Pig-Pen's every move
In the book of life, the answers aren't in the back

And I live in a different state now, literally and figuratively
With that same ragged blanket
Still tattered, still torn —
A little more like me now
Absence makes the heart grow fonder, but it sure makes the rest of you lonely

And I don't get to see you,
We never play football like Linus and Lucy anymore,
Nor bicker like them, either
Two siblings once always together — and now always apart
Keep looking up

I learn new things now, in literature and science
And all my new friends don't know you —
I'm getting used to my clean, stainless carpets
And my unstained, upright bookcase
I think I've discovered the secret of life — you just hang around until you get used to it

But sometimes I just really miss watching Charlie Brown.

A Total Eclipse:*Haiku*

She gripped and tugged at
The folds of her imperfect skin —
Grimaced at herself

It overwhelmed her
A hazy fog that consumed her
Darkened and dampened

She observed her friends
Constantly overachieving —
And she shamed herself

A soft voice whispered
“Why can’t you just *be* perfect?”
She needed to be

She awoke early,
Went to the gym frequently, and
Took care of her mind

She studied harder,
She worked herself to the brink, but
It wasn’t enough ...

She wasn’t enough
Her head blackened with thoughts of
Her own self-loathing

A total solar
Eclipse — a consuming shadow
Blurred her thoughts and heart

“Why?”, said her own voice
“Why can’t you just *be* perfect?”
She had no answer

Because she failed quite
Often and made plenty mistakes —
A fate for mortals

But it was okay —
That would all change because the world
Told her, “Be perfect”

And she would be.

Heart Tattoo:

Tankas

Yesterday I drew
A bright, red heart on your wrist —
Drew the same on mine.
I used my best, inky pen
Just for my favorite, you.

You drew a heart. Why?
Why me? I’m battered and bruised,
And bear ugly scars.
I’m dumb, unmotivated
And you are ... well ... you are *you*.

Why not, you? Because
I love your imperfect scars,
They’re all that you are:
Beautiful; broken,
Not shattered — human, alive.

Now we’re connected
In your pain and in your joy.
When things go askew,
I’ll take part in the story
You the robber; me the decoy.

Connected? Never
Will you be just a decoy.
To me, you’ll be more ...

And I won't drag you with me,
Won't expose you to the dark.

But when you touch that
Heart on your wrist, mine aches, too.
You think you're alone,
But trust me, your sorrow is
One I'm well acquainted with.

Because my tattoo
Will fade when yours does, as well.
So take care of it:
That wonderful heart of yours.
It makes you beautiful, strong.

Even so, I still
Will scrub it, wash it until
It's gone; because
It's not fair to you to be
Connected to me, shattered.

If you wash it off
It is okay, don't worry.
I'll always carry
That red, inky pen, and I'll
Always take your hand in mine.

Two halves make a shared heart whole.

But mine will always be broken.

Workshop #2: Poetry Writing Draft Revision

Charlie Brown:

(Multidimensional Freeform)



I miss watching Charlie Brown —
 And carelessly dragging my tattered, ragged blanket
 Just like Linus did, across a dirt- and PB&J- stained floor littered with
 An obnoxious amount of toys
 Worn and loved only by the two of us

It's strange — the way we can so easily forget
 The old, barely-standing bookcase, our most cherished games —
 The way we used to sit and stare, fixated, at characters in a show
 That pre-dated even us
Learning to ignore things is one of the great paths to inner peace

You used to play sports just as Lucy did,
 Competitively calculating your next move
 And I was Charlie Brown,
 Innocently obliging, your biggest fan
Life has no remote

Anger consumes me, tears and snags at me
 It's the anger of being thrown ruthlessly into this peculiar unnerving
 Thing people seem to hate, to despise, to attack —
 This thing called adulthood
You've heard of the fury of a woman scorned, haven't you?

We're tossed, carelessly, without another thought
 Into a whirlwind of unpaid bills and limitless obligation,

Of 'how's your job' instead of 'how are yous'
 — now we're stuck in the hazy cloud that followed Pig-Pen's every move
In the book of life, the answers aren't in the back

And I live in a different state now, literally and figuratively
 With that same ragged blanket
 Still tattered, still torn —
 A little more like me now
Absence makes the heart grow fonder, but it sure makes the rest of you lonely

And I don't get to see you,
 We never play football like Linus and Lucy anymore,
 Nor bicker like them, either
 Two siblings once always together — and now always apart
Keep looking up

I learn new things now, in literature and science
 And all my new friends don't know you —
 I'm getting used to my clean, stainless carpets
 And my untouched, upright bookcase
I think I've discovered the secret of life – you just hang around until you get used to it

But sometimes I just really miss watching Charlie Brown.

The Total Eclipse:
 (Haiku)

When she was younger,
 She enjoyed observing the moon,
 Wide-eyed, struck by awe

She used to sit still,
 Cherishing the stars that dotted
 The unmoving sky

She was younger then,
 Untarnished by the world's judgment,
 By her *own* judgment

Becuause

Now

...

She gripped and tugged at
The folds of her imperfect skin —
Grimaced at herself

It overwhelmed her
A hazy fog that consumed her
Darkened and dampened

She observed her friends
Constantly overachieving —
And she shamed herself

A soft voice whispered
“Why can’t you just *be* perfect?”
She needed to *be*

The things she once loved
Were now nothing but reminders
Of what she had lost:

Blissful ignorance,
Her freedom from society’s
Suffocating grip

She wasn’t enough
Her head blackened with thoughts of
Her own self-loathing

A total solar
Eclipse — a consuming shadow
Blurred her thoughts and heart

“Why?”, said her own voice
“Why can’t you just *be* perfect?”
She had no answer

And the moon was sad,
Her beloved stars felt gloomy, too
Once flight, now shackles

Yes, she failed quite
Often and made plenty mistakes —
A fate for mortals

But it was okay —
That would all change because the world
Told her, “Be perfect”

And she would *be*.

Heart Tattoo:

Tankas

Yesterday I drew
A bright, red heart on your wrist —
Drew the same on mine.
I used my best, inky pen
Just for my favorite, you.

You drew a heart. Why?
Why me? I'm battered and bruised,
And bear ugly scars.
Broken, unmotivated
And you are ... well ... you are *you*.

Why not, you? Because
I love even your worst scars,
They're all that you are:
A ball made of color and strength
Not shattered — human, alive.

Now we're connected
In your pain and in your joy.

When things go askew,
I'll take part in the story
You the robber; me the decoy.

I'm a rose, you a
Sunflower, me the rain, you
The light. You're the hope
That comes after the storm — don't
Trade your happiness for mine.

But — when you touch that
Heart on your wrist, mine aches, too.
You think you're alone,
But trust me, your sorrow is
Always mine, always shared — *ours*

Because my tattoo
Will fade when yours does, as well.
So take care of it:
That wonderful heart of yours.
It makes you ... well ... makes you, *you*

Even so, I still
Will scrub it, watch it disappear
Underneath water's
Scrutinizing glare; this is
My sorrow, and mine alone

If you wash it off
It is okay, don't worry.
I'll always carry
That red, inky pen, and I'll
Always take your hand in mine.

I'll trace the heart to
Brighten its hue, not afraid
To admit my tattoo will
Always fade when yours does, too.

Analysis of Growth and Improvement on Poetry

This workshop was undoubtedly the most difficult one I completed this semester. Personally, poetry has always challenged me both as a writer and as a person; unlike other types of writing, it's simply not something that can be forced, but instead must come from a place of intimacy and vulnerability. At the time of this workshop, I was particularly struggling to tap into those two emotions, causing me writer's block as I attempted to complete the assignment on time. Thus, I was looking forward to the opportunity to complete a revision for this workshop in particular — one that would allow me the time and space to be more introspective and, hopefully, produce a more polished version of my poems as a result.

Throughout my revision, I worked to change some of the diction and content I implemented in each poem, adding more detail to the haikus and tankas in particular. Within the haikus, I wanted to more successfully relate the poems to the title of the work, causing me to write additional stanzas that corresponded to the idea of an “eclipse,” including some about the moon and the stars. I moreover slightly altered formatting and syntax, italicizing more words to create emphasis, and adding spacing before and after some phrases (this is specifically seen in the fourth and last stanzas). Such formatting decisions seemed fitting for this poem because, as discussed in my original craft essay, it acted as a nod to perfectionism and to the notion that it's impossible to meet “perfect” standards. Keeping this in mind, I kept the 5-8-5 (instead of 5-7-5) form of the haikus in my revision, and still kept an odd number of stanzas. Furthermore, I slightly changed the title of the work, replacing the “a” with “the” to focus more intently on the intensity of the solar eclipse. Within the tankas, I worked to fix the stanzas on the right side, mostly removing overdone words like “beautiful” or “strong” as they can sometimes act as short-cuts in poetry. I challenged myself to think more critically about the language I was using

to describe something as serious as mental health. Noting this, I moreover changed the ending, hoping to make it less cliché than the original draft. Within the first poem — the multidimensional freeform — however, I didn't make too many edits other than a few grammatical and punctuation changes.

Overall, I thought that I was able to develop a heightened awareness of the language and messaging of particular poems; I thought that I was able to grow as a writer through my ability to be open and personal, as well as through being more selective with the phrasing I chose in each poem. Still, going forward, I'd definitely like to see improvement in my ability to write a wider variety of poetry formats. As of now, I'm most comfortable writing poetry in freeform as most of my pieces are fairly casual and maintain a stream-of-consciousness tone; thus, I want to push myself outside of my comfort zone and experiment with more difficult, restricting forms of poetry like sestinas. Moreover, I'd like to challenge myself to read more poetry. Often, I find myself only reading pieces of poetry for specific academic assignments, or not reading any works at all due to time restraints; that said, I truly enjoy immersing myself in poetry, and I'm confident that I can gain inspiration from professional poets for my own pieces. Creatively, I want to try my hand at different spacing and other stylistic techniques in poetry — like italicizing words, using other media (such as songs or paintings) as inspiration, and purposely altering the syntax of the sentence, as in our “strangeness in the sentence” activity. Too often, I feel as though my writing resembles dialogue — I want to incorporate some purposeful oddities in my poems!

Workshop #3: Nonfiction Writing Draft

The Drop

Growing up, I adored the gut-wrenching, adrenaline-inducing effect of rollercoasters. Each summer, I used to drag my family to our local amusement park, the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, digesting the sun's endless gaze and eagerly awaiting my turn to experience the season's greatest attractions. I fell in love with the smell of freshly-popped, buttery popcorn, the sight of brightly-colored flip-flops and sunglasses, and the sound of seagulls flying overhead, describing to us the crisp air above. More than anything, however, I reveled in the way that roller coasters made me feel: as if I were invincible, untouchable to no one but the breeze that lifted my hair during a steep drop and the shoulder restraints that fastened me to my seat.

That feeling of losing control, of surrendering myself to the twists and turns of a particularly speedy coaster — that was a known feeling. But nobody warned me about what it would feel like when this premonition was the opposite: entirely and dreadfully unknown.

When I was a sophomore in high school, I experienced this phenomenon of losing control — of plunging headfirst into foreign waters — for the first time. I've always been a bit of a perfectionist, holding myself to impossible standards and settling for nothing less than flawless. Of course, this unreasonable expectation is simply unachievable ... but, at the time, I couldn't handle that reality. I can't pinpoint the exact moment when everything felt *just* out of reach, or when my head became clouded with intrusive, intensifying thoughts. Instead, I'll have to settle for this: a description of my favorite roller coaster, the Giant Dipper.

Every time I prepare myself to ride the Giant Dipper, a famous wooden coaster that first opened in 1924 and has since greeted over 66 million patrons, I nudge my way to the front of the line, securing a spot — actually, the *best* spot — on the ride: the first seat in the front row. When the

lap bar closes, slightly squeezing the skin on my thighs, a small rumble of anxious yet equally excited murmurs arises from behind me, and a short safety announcement reverberates through the loudspeakers that hang overhead: *“Please keep your arms and legs inside the cart at all times,”* it says.

I throw both of my arms in the air. Then the coaster takes off.

Immediately, the volant coaster shoots through a pitch-black tunnel and soars straight up an incline, the inertia of the coaster pressing my back to my seat. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* The Giant Dipper inches upward, moving me further away from the ground with each resounding *tick* up the chain lift. Then, all of a sudden, as if I had suddenly floated there, I’m at the top of a steep slope, completely exposed, completely visible, completely vulnerable. It’s that feeling of being at the top of an impossibly tall hill — one that seems to defy every law of gravity and physics — just before you drop. It’s that feeling of peering over the top of the cart, looking at the hill you’re about to plummet down, and not being able to stop yourself from moving with the coaster. It’s that feeling of falling endlessly, inevitably *down. down. down.* Sophomore year felt like that.

Today, that lurching feeling in my stomach still occasionally infiltrates me at a pace I wish I had the power to slow. It’s a haze that sometimes won’t clear, a fog that makes everything seem ever so slightly unattainable. But, on other days, it can be different — a piece of dust blown away in one small huff of air, a darkness that can be fixed with the simple flick of a nearby light switch. My mind is the host of a constant balancing act, a strange teeter-totter between the moment right before rollercoaster nosedives and the jovial thrill that that can ensue just seconds after.

What do you do when your body is at war with itself? How do you grieve the loss of yourself?

I'm not sure. I doubt I'll ever know. But I can try.

I often describe myself as a “list person”; from tasks to favorite songs, I like to keep track of everything that makes up some part of my life. Though a small, seemingly trivial act, this is how I cope with the aforementioned question. It’s my way of trying to control the uncontrollable — it’s how I feel connected in a world that feels so well, disconnected.

Knowing this, I’ve intermittently created lists of things that make me happy about people and about my life over the past couple of years. But, as my schedule has grown busier and my mind becomes more engulfed in to-dos and work-filled days, I’ve oft tossed these iterations aside, discarding them as easily as I do a gum wrapper or an old receipt. However, I recently started creating a new, and hopefully more long-lasting one. It’s entitled — quite creatively — “A List of Good Things.” This is what I have written so far:

1. Enjoying the fall air at local coffee shops
2. Blasting music in the car during late-night drives
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4. Watching *Lost* with my roommates
5. Seeing strangers smile to themselves when walking alone

At the moment, it's fairly short — but more material gets added to it with each passing day. Dealing with the ambiguity of life's big questions, of personal revelation and interrogation can be overwhelmingly acute ... it's that same feeling, right before a coaster's nosedive. Sometimes, however, it can be worse: it may be the uninhibited screaming on a particularly thrilling roller coaster — a yell that simply blends in with the chorus of people's cheers and jovial exclamations, unheard and forgotten.

Nevertheless, I still enjoy going to amusement parks, and I still drag my family to the Boardwalk each summer — but I have garnered an altered appreciation of them, one that was not previously there when I first smelled the park's freshly-popped popcorn and laid my eyes on the vivid colors of patrons' sunglasses and flip flops. I still revel in the way that roller coasters make me feel — but I no longer feel invincible and untouchable. Instead, I try my best to acknowledge all that surfaces moments before a coaster's drop — moments before *my* drop: the sacredness and the frustration, the anxiousness and the exhilaration. It's these moments, these emotions that, although frightening, make me feel more alive, more *human*.

Oh! That reminds me: I thought of one more thing to add to my *growing* list.

6. Roller coasters

Workshop #3: Nonfiction Writing Draft Revision

The Drop

Growing up, I adored the gut-wrenching, adrenaline-inducing effect of rollercoasters. Each summer, I used to drag my family to our local amusement park, the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, digesting the sun's endless gaze and eagerly awaiting my turn to experience the

season's greatest attractions. I fell in love with the smell of freshly-popped, buttery popcorn, the sight of brightly-colored flip-flops and sunglasses, and the distant squawking of seagulls flying overhead, describing to us the crisp air above. More than anything, however, I reveled in the way that roller coasters made me feel: as if I were invincible, untouchable to everyone but the breeze that lifted my hair during a steep drop and the shoulder restraints that fastened me to my seat.

That feeling of losing control, of surrendering myself to the twists and turns of a particularly speedy coaster — that was a known feeling. But nobody warned me about what it would feel like when this emotion was the opposite: entirely and dreadfully unknown.

When I was a sophomore in high school, I experienced this phenomenon of losing control — of plunging headfirst into foreign waters — for the first time. I've always been a bit of a perfectionist, holding myself to impossible standards and settling for nothing less than flawless. Of course, this unreasonable expectation is simply unachievable ... but, at the time, I couldn't handle that reality. I can't pinpoint the exact moment when everything felt *just* out of reach, or when my head became clouded with intrusive, intensifying thoughts. Instead, I'll have to settle for this: a description of my favorite roller coaster, the Giant Dipper.

Every time I prepare myself to ride the Giant Dipper, a famous wooden coaster that first opened in 1924 and has since greeted over 66 million patrons, I nudge my way to the front of the line, securing a spot — actually, the *best* spot — on the ride: the first seat in the front row. When the lap bar closes, slightly squeezing the skin on my thighs, a small rumble of anxious yet equally excited murmurs arises from behind me, and a short safety announcement reverberates through

the loudspeakers that hang overhead: “*Please keep your arms and legs inside the cart at all times,*” it declares.

I throw both of my arms in the air. Then the coaster takes off.

Immediately, the violent coaster shoots through a pitch-black tunnel and soars straight up an incline, the inertia of the coaster pressing my back to my seat. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* The Giant Dipper inches upward, moving me further away from the ground with each resounding *tick* up the chain lift. Then, all of a sudden, as if I had suddenly floated there, I’m at the top of a steep slope, completely exposed, completely visible, completely vulnerable. It’s that feeling of being at the top of that impossibly tall hill — one that seems to defy every law of gravity and physics — just before you drop. It’s that feeling of peering over the top of the cart, looking at the hill you’re about to plummet down, and not being able to stop yourself from moving with the coaster. It’s that feeling of falling endlessly, inevitably *down. down. down.* Sophomore year felt like that.

Before entering high school, I was constantly exposed to a romanticized version of these four years. My parents would frequently advise me, “Enjoy it, Kayla! These were some of the best years of my childhood ... ones you *can’t get back.*” Meant to be encouraging, that sentiment was anything but that: it terrified me, especially as I entered my second year.

Instead of the newfound sense of ease that should’ve accompanied me as I walked my school’s halls as a sophomore, no longer a wide-eyed, scared freshman, a knot consistently seemed to find its way in my stomach. Beginning to attend new classes, an unsettling fear arose within me as I

worried that these years — *the ones I can't get back* — were escaping me, moving away as easily and as inevitably as a coaster falls down a steep incline.

At the outset, it appeared that everything was okay: I received good grades, played decently in my soccer games, was involved in extracurriculars, and seemed to have a good amount of friends. In reality, however, I felt a strange yet intruding sense of isolation from others — and also from myself. I worked until early hours of the morning, barely saw my so-called friends, and felt as though I was stuck on a never-ending hamster wheel or in some strange *Groundhog Day* scenario where every week — every day — felt ... just *meh*.

As a result, I started to fall behind in classes, losing all motivation I once prided myself on having. I started to dread going to soccer practice, losing interest in the activity I used to love the most. I started losing my friends, never seeming to have the time or energy to hang out with them outside of my school's allotted hours. And, perhaps most scarily, *I started to lose myself*.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Once again, it felt as if I were peering over the edge of a particularly tall coaster, just before the drop — it felt like those two seconds of forgetting where you are and *who* you are. It was a churning feeling (almost a nauseous feeling) of disconnect, of not being grounded, a sensation of being aware of my surroundings ... but of not really being *there*. Completely weightless.

Today, that lurching feeling still occasionally infiltrates me at a pace I wish I had the power to slow. It's a haze that sometimes won't clear, a fog that makes everything seem ever so slightly unattainable. But, on other days, it can be different — a piece of dust blown away in one small huff of air, a darkness that can be fixed with the simple flick of a nearby light switch. My mind is the host of a constant balancing act, a strange teeter-totter between the moment right before rollercoaster nosedives and the jovial thrill that that can ensue just seconds after.

What do you do when your body is at war with itself? How do you grieve the loss of yourself?

I'm not sure. I doubt I'll ever know. But I can try.

And I try in different ways.

I often describe myself as a “list person”; from tasks to favorite songs, I like to keep track of everything that makes up some part of my life. Though a small, seemingly trivial act, this is how I cope with the aforementioned question. It's my way of trying to control the uncontrollable — it's how I feel connected in a world that feels so well, disconnected.

Knowing this, I've intermittently created lists of things that make me happy about people and about my life over the past couple of years. But, as my schedule has grown busier and my mind becomes more engulfed in to-dos and work-filled days, I've oft tossed these iterations aside, discarding them as easily as I do a gum wrapper or an old receipt. However, I recently started creating a new, and hopefully more long-lasting one. It's entitled — quite creatively — “A List of Good Things.” This is what I have written so far:

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Analysis of Growth and Improvement on Nonfiction

Creative nonfiction has always been my favorite form of writing; the age-old saying, “Write what you know” is one that has certainly resonated with me throughout my academic career, and has assisted me with this particular style. This specific piece, however, was perhaps the most difficult creative nonfiction work I’ve completed due to the intimacy of the topic: handling declining mental health. Nevertheless, I truly enjoyed this workshop as it gave me the opportunity to express myself more completely to readers, especially after editing some of the content of the short essay.

Within this workshop, I most struggled with being specific in terms of how I felt — or even simply what happened — during my sophomore year of high school. Throughout the original piece, I made numerous allusions to this period in my life, but never fully explained it, making it difficult for the reader to completely understand what I was attempting to say about my mental health during that time. Although the roller coaster metaphor may have provided more insight into my emotions, the story was ultimately not grounded in events. This pitfall was what I most wanted to change in my revisions.

Thus, while editing the story, I went more in-depth about my experience dealing with mental health issues for the first time in the middle section of the piece. I attempted to be more specific about how this phenomenon manifested itself in my life, including in its capacity to cause me worsening motivation for and interest in activities I once loved. Moreover, I included specific (and real) dialogue from my parents that, at the time, had caused me some anxious feeling and nerves that became heightened during my second year. Not pinpointing one event in

time, I tried to instead focus on smaller instances that were indicative of my diminishing mental health as I felt that this was a more realistic description of what actually happened; I faced mental health issues over time, not because of one experience in particular. I also attempted to maintain the connection between my mental health and a rollercoaster, adding a paragraph about the feeling of “weightlessness” that can accompany both experiences. Regarding syntax, I furthermore italicized more words to add emphasis where I felt was necessary.

As a creative nonfiction writer, I feel as though I’ve primarily grown in my ability to add description and imagery to events that might ordinarily seem mundane. I enjoy taking the ordinary — like a normal roller coaster or amusement park — and making it come to life through vivid language and explanation. These descriptions, I think, are my strong suit in creative writing overall, but they can certainly have their disadvantages; as seen in this piece, the imagery can outweigh the actual events of the story, contributing to an overall sense of confusion among readers.

In the future, I’d like to be more adventurous with including dialogue and specificity in my stories; I enjoy writing descriptively, and, though this type of imagery necessary in a story, I would like to do a better job at adding particular experiences in creative nonfiction, which can be done through dialogue. This, I think, can help humanize the story I’m trying to tell, allowing readers to better connect to it. I also believe that I can improve my inclusion of allusions and metaphors in my writing; sometimes I feel as though I am a bit too explicit in explaining how these devices connect to the overall message of the piece, removing some of the mystery and power behind them. Creatively, I hope to incorporate more elements like the “List of Good Things” to add more of a personal, unique touch to my work; these components can also help break up the text, making it easier for readers to comprehend. Moreover, I’d like to try writing in

a slightly less formal tone for these types of pieces. While it can be difficult to break out of the academic writing mindset, writing informally can be a creative choice that makes the story more entertaining, relatable, and ultimately, creative.