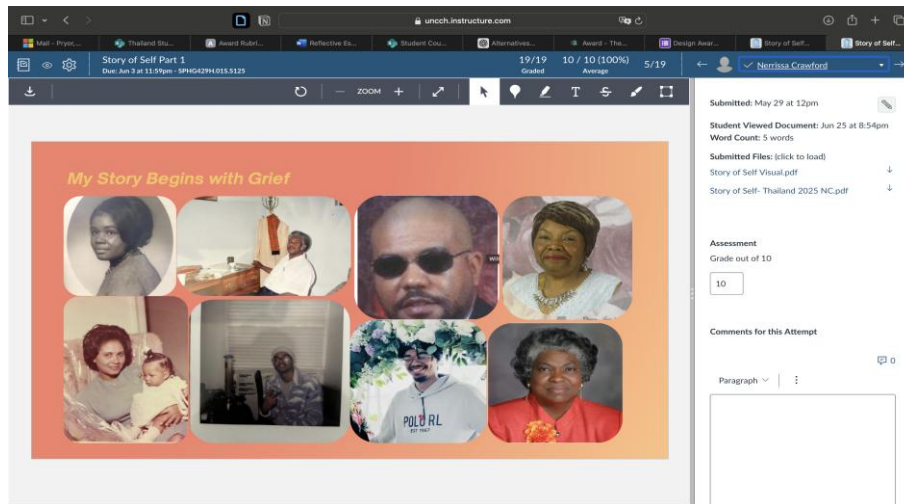


Student #1 Pre and Post Story of Self (Signature Assignment)



Part I: Story of Self

My story begins with the everlasting presence of grief; a universal experience that connects us all. It has led me on this adventure to Thailand as I create space for my grief to bloom into hope, acting as a catalyst for change and advocacy. I carry my grief everywhere I go.

My experience is a reminder of the love that lingers after the loss, and the hope that flourishes during unexpected times. I have attended more funerals than I can count, but the loss of various family members influenced my passion to be a vessel to others. I have always had a positive outlook on grief, turning pain and sorrow into power as my family taught me. I was lucky to meet generations of family members who were leaders in this world and influenced my interest in public health and community advocacy.

Even though my family members were in various disciplines such as music, grassroots organizing, cosmetology, etc., I was influenced by these amazing leaders in unconventional ways. My cousin <Name Removed>, who passed away from cervical cancer, was a strong advocate for our community, serving four terms from 1993-2007 on the Winston-Salem, NC city council. She led community and family events and actively worked to preserve the history and legacy of African Americans in Winston-Salem, NC. I have fond memories of our conversations about school activities and volunteer opportunities I would participate in. And at the end of our conversations, she would always ask me, “so what’s next?” meaning, how you are going to continue making an impact in this world. As I navigate my life today, I keep that question in my heart, a gentle reminder of the seeds of change she planted.

One of my closest family friends, <Name Removed>, was an amazing pianist who traveled overseas and collaborated with famous singer-songwriters. His kindness and compassion for others was always fascinating to me, <Name Removed> would go out of his way to be present for the family and quick to share wisdom. I was deeply inspired by his compassionate spirit and

the stories he would share about his travel experiences as a musician. <Name Removed> taught me the importance of kindness and the gift of storytelling which guides the work of leaders. Along with many other family members, these powerful leaders inspired me at an early age and contributed to my interest in health and wellness for my community.

These impactful leaders inspired the world in numerous ways; they created a clear path for me to understand what it means to lead with a helpful spirit. And when I find myself feeling the absence of their presence, I remember their wisdom and kindness which acted as a guide to explore how I planned to be a vessel to others. Throughout many conversations, certain moments would spark my interest, as my family would frequently discuss our family lineage, individuals who passed away due to chronic illnesses, or the lack of resources throughout communities. These conversations pulled at my heart, and I wanted to find solutions to mitigate the negative experiences of communities of color.

My perspective on grief completely shifted after May 27th, 2024, I learned that my oldest brother was involved in a terrible accident which left him on life-support after someone attempted to take his life in Oakland, California. I was completely devastated to say the least, and I could feel my sense of happiness slowly deplete. My hopeful perspective on grief had completely disappeared. I did not know how I would navigate this world without the presence of someone I loved so dearly, who consistently believed in my dreams and pushed me to be a leader. Even as I reflect on this 1st year anniversary of his passing due to gun violence, it is difficult to articulate the experience of losing a sibling; this life experience impacted my joy, academic career, and identity in diverse ways. For the longest time, I struggled to find joy in mundane things, because somehow, I was always reminded of my brother. Through my identity, I lost myself in a journey of navigating this new experience of grief. Losing part of your community can be scary, especially when it is unexpected. My brother was supportive, caring, community-oriented, charming, and free-spirited. Not only am I grappling with his loss, but I am also grieving all that he was and all that he would become. Since his passing, my perspective on community has shifted, I never realized the village I had until I was met face-to-face with this type of grief. Moments when I did not realize I was slipping into a depressive slump, I had family and friends lift my head up to remind me of the end goal—to share my experiences, remain hungry for wisdom, and learn to use this experience to be a vessel to others.

We are all connected to one another, and we will always experience grief, whether that be a person, a dream, sickness, etc. I will carry my grieving heart filled with memories and bring it into the light so that I can see all the wonderful people that were pertinent to the trajectory of my life; and I will share it gracefully, I will take that wisdom into different rooms, and leverage it in unimaginable ways; because hope is possible. This trip is a journey back to myself so that I can be a vessel to others as I have a desire to use my hands throughout the community. Grief is a universal language, and our experiences guide how we navigate time and space in the presence of people and communities we have never met. Grief makes us compassionate, motivates us to

give back, and it is a reminder of the memories we keep alive by sharing with other parts of the world. I carry my brother everywhere I go.

Part II: Story of Self



Upon arriving to Thailand, I shared a story filled with grief along with my hope to leverage those uncomfortable feelings of the loss of my community. I talked about this universal experience that connects us all, I talked about the loss of my cousin, my grandmother, a friend, and my oldest brother. During the beginning of this journey of self, I said, “I carry my grief everywhere I go” and now I’d like to change that statement to, “I carry my community everywhere I go”. My perspective around grief is constantly transforming, I arrived in Thailand with a grieving spirit that was also filled with hope. And I talk about grief so much because I think we don’t normalize those conversations enough. As a leader, this is one of my many efforts to share my own story—with the hope that it might help someone navigate theirs. This month I’ve realized that I have treated grief as something I have to endure, rather than something I have to translate.

The moment I realized this, to my surprise, grief has shown up less and less throughout this trip. Instead, I’ve experienced exciting moments where I’m reminded of the community surrounding me from a heavenly place and of leaders that inspired me this month. What I loved most about this trip was the opportunity to engage with leaders whose passion jumps at you and even lingers after the conversation has come to an end and the vans pull up to take us to the next destination. For example, learning from P-Thorn and hearing his journey to support his community through the Zero-Baht shop was deeply

inspiring. One of the first things I noticed was P-thorn's smile, which seemed to hold so many memories. It sparked a sense of joy for me to see his passion manifest throughout his community.

During our time in Satun, I enjoyed the opportunity to cook with some of the local women in the community. Although my Pad Thai wasn't visually appealing—thanks to an overload of red pepper flakes that I decided to throw in there last minute—while I stirred together the noodles and mixed vegetables, memories of my grandmother flooded in, recalling how she'd always cook extra food for her neighbors so we could walk across the street to bring them a plate. I've always been surrounded by that kindness and community growing up, and seeing it here reminds me of my grandmother's influence on me.

While I've been soaking up this opportunity to engage with the community, I've also been taking baby steps to get out of my comfort zone. During our excursion in the Gulf of Thailand, I had no intention of doing everything on that day's itinerary. I used the excuse that I don't know how to swim and have never felt comfortable floating—and most of the time, I simply say no to new experiences. However, on this day, I dived from a pier/mini cliff, I kayaked into a cave, and I went snorkeling (until I felt something touch my leg, then I immediately went back to the boat), I did everything I said I wouldn't do! Every time I thought about saying no, I would remind myself of my brother's adventurous spirit, he would've given us a countdown just as Carter did and wait for us to jump in the water. It also makes me think of how much we can do if we can just get out of our comfort zone and take no as a question as we learned from Mr. Mechai Viravadya.

I've shared many wonderful moments here—these are just a few. These experiences have shaped my perspective around the community tremendously; I understand that community exists beyond the place where I grew up. Community is the resemblance of the kindness of my grandmother's hands, the adventurous spirit in brother's eyes, the chance to tell a story of community and resilience with coffee, the opportunity to cook with elders so they can tell you to slow down, it's about advocacy and hope. I carry the community that I have lost, and I'll boast about the community I have gained.

Student #2 Pre and Post Story of Self (Signature Assignment)

Part I: Story of Self

Writing has always been very personal to me as someone who hasn't always felt understood and likewise hasn't always understood social situations or people or the world. and also as someone who is a young person living in a time with so many things to be upset about, it's been a way to process anger and grief and injustice

so it's been very important personally and politically for me. but it's always been private.

i'm also someone who is deeply frightened of the idea that literally everything in life, every conversation and decision, involves risk taking. you have to risk judgment and rejection and pain to live and that scares me. so i hate sharing my writing because it's a big risk to me to share something so important to me

so i thought what better way to share my story of self than to literally involve yall in that journey im taking from fear to growth through risk taking. to me this trip to thailand is all about risks, new places, new people and friendships to develop, and a shift in my academic career from stable stem towards honest humanities - human rights and social oriented work, towards making my personal and my political public and building connections based on vulnerability

so today i wrote a poem.

Fiddler (*Ocypode quadrata*)

1.

Watch closely: in the blue light of the moon,
they seem unseen. But see
how they gasp—sinkholes open
Close. Open. Close. Signposts of life
in the smooth sand. They wash away like maiden vessels
under the pounding waves, these dry sanctuaries
ravaged by even the calmest tide.
It's constant: this battle for breath,
this expulsion of salt from the quiet,
this intrusion of sea
sealing them shut with corpses of
kin—coquina, scallops, clam,
chitin and carbonate slammed into
each other over and over and
over again until they are too small
to see and just small enough to choke
these mouths in the breathing body

of the earth. They carry a legacy
of spirits—lungs full with lessons in liminal
security, intoxicating isolation.

Fatal fears passed on
the dying breaths of generations.

See how they learn to live
as ghosts. Crabs, born buried
in the silt of their sisters.

See how they survive
by staying one breath above
suffocation.

2.

And there! In the dark, they emerge silent
as stillborns, scuttling in bursts of scurry,
still, scurry, still. Like intruders
in their own homes. Hear
how they say nothing? The light
washes them translucent, legs

thin, body pressed to the sand
as if they could blend away into nothing
as if they could stay hidden
in this wide open world. Everything
and anything out here is a death sentence:
speeding across the brittle sand, even

silence does not secure safety.

But where are they to go? Back
to the breathless dark? They speak
to one another, *stay fast, stay quiet,*
stay hidden.

3.

He grips her pincers shut and holds her up to the light so that we may better see the raw flesh of her underbelly. She shines pale—a stolen moonrock, her shell textured with craters and crevices wrought intricately by a cosmic womb. Still as Earth, I watch as he tags her, neon plastic waving stiff and too-straight, boasting that she's numbered 50 like the stars flagging our ancient moon as Property of Man Unkind. Written in scrawled legal script along her belly: to be natural is to be owned. *She's a bioindicator*, he tells us over the sound of the surf. *Lets us know when human activities are affecting the beach ecosystem.* He says this with a laugh, as if the notion of an untouched space is too freeing to be true. As if there was nothing in this wide open world that he could not pinch between his two fingers, that he could not lay out, vulnerable and virginal, beneath his palms. But when he reaches with one red-raw hand to pull down his straw sun hat, she—quick—pinches the thin flesh between thumb and index finger, falling towards our coal-breathing planet in a descending chord of canary song. And for all his sandal stamping and stomping, he can't seem to stop her from disappearing into the earth as if she willed it to swallow her whole.

4.

Come now, daughter: blue as wrist-veins
lifeblood, infant lips. Your crab legs
near grown. Your choices near-made.
Will you stay? Warm and buried like a
secret, the remnants of your watery

sisters whispering constant at the edge
of each sea-breath—death-dancing
this life. Keep quiet, keep silent, keep still.
Keep surviving.

Or would you risk the moon's light
casting gull shadows on your exposed skin?

Would you become prey in exchange for one
uninhibited breath? There are no
warm spaces there, this world smelling of salt
in wounds and shells in skin and so unlike
the dead parts of yourself buried
in the ocean floor.

Now, the moon waxes, the ocean
swells, the crabs gasp holes in the sand.
They ask: *Would you kill yourself
to survive? Would you risk your life
to live?*

My dear, choose quick—for the moon
stays changing,
and hunting season is upon us

Part II: Story of Self

Garden Gate by Mon Rovia (0:55)

I debated for a while whether I should write another poem for this second story of self, but I felt it would be cheating in a way to not share my reflections in direct prose, unburdened by metaphors and non specifics. well. mostly.

and so untangling that knot of self, i asked myself what discomfort was left and what gratitude was left and was surprised to find them both oriented around the same spot - the culture of giving

I can have a hard time accepting favors or gifts from people—it makes me feel uncomfortable and inadequate, and so relationships of such unfiltered giving as are normalized in Thailand have been challenging for me to navigate.

The first time I really confronted this knot of emotion for what it was was when I had the privilege of meeting Nina's grandmother and found that my immediate response to her unfettered generosity was guilt. I thought I understood non contractual relationships and the nature of providing without expectation theoretically but I'd never been treated that way before so her kindness felt overwhelming to behold.

in her automatic, immediate giving i saw the MFUstudents serving me first at dinner and i felt simultaneously intrusive and grateful, but that gratitude was outweighed by the guilt in my chest feeling like that nagging worry in my head that started with the waste pickers - a fear of being the boy in the giving tree, of taking and taking what was freely given, partaking in thoughtfully curated experiences without truly offering anything meaningful in return. of replicating dynamics of power and extraction, false grandeur and underserved praise

but then i'm crouched underneath the cafe in pangkhon, talking to the woman downstairs through smiles and a mutual love for the kittens she draws out from the table for me to play with the moment she sees the way my eyes dart around in search of them. and again i feel that worry of intrusion but it feels more eclipsed by gratitude and later i see her smile lines in the women of satun standing tall in front of their seaweed farms as we literally invade their backyard and yet they still invite me further, nudging me in broken english to touch and taste the seaweed they painstakingly curated, and again i feel that tug between guilt for somehow forcing this giving from them and a growing realization that there's joy in their eyes and pride in the set of their shoulders, that giving is providing something to them in return and maybe gratitude is the way to start giving back.

days later we're planting mangroves and a small girl is leading me through thorns to the next gash in the earth, methodically handing me a root and pointing to its newly carved cradle in the soil, helping me as i struggle to pull one from its bag and handing it right back to me when it's free, letting me be the one to plant this new sapling over and over and over and i wonder if again im unwittingly taking something from her, if she feels obligated to let me be the one to press the

new soil back into the earth but that voice in my head is abruptly shocked out of me as children's laughter brings me back to the present moment and i suddenly see some of my younger self in this girl's purposeful, serious moves, and realize that she's

getting this chance to be in charge, to share something she knows with someone older that doesn't. and i hear the laughter around me as i stumble through a thai phrase and find that for the first time in my life it brings me joy to be laughed at.

she hands me another root and with it she hands me a jar of tiger balm and a slip of seaweed and a sweet wrapped in leaves and a piece of fish cut from the bone and a beaded bracelet with a 60 baht tag and all the while I can't help but ask myself what have I done to deserve such kindness? What am I to do with the weight of owing them more than I can ever return?

and there I go again, scurrying away behind phantom prose and pretty rhythms because it's easier than saying just this: that I thought I understood relationships of giving and I was wrong. that i haven't been living out my own values and worldviews

and i can't help but wonder if all this thinking and analyzing and worrying about risks and wrongdoings is not a little self centered. if i'm not bringing a new kind of biased expectation of these people with my constant sociological evaluations of our dynamics.

if automatic giving might just come from letting go of your fear of judgment, focusing more on providing for others than worrying about intruding upon them. focusing more on doing right than avoiding wrong.

and so as i take this nursery plant from her still growing hands, as my thoughts continue their ever churning whirl of worry, i feel myself smile and think, so what? let them laugh. let them give. let them lead.

I hope I'm becoming the sort of person who responds to giving not with guilt but with gratitude and generosity. i hope i'm becoming someone who understands intrinsically that the giving tree isn't about a tree who gave until she had nothing but a boy who took without giving — that maybe the way to prevent others from becoming the tree isn't to worry about being this coercive force of the boy, but rather to actively give in return, supporting each other with mutual sacrifices and creating networks of communal care

and I want to say that it hadn't just been Thailand that had influenced this transformation in my story of self, but also you guys. i've been equally astonished by the depth of compassion shown by so many of you, the way mira constantly looks out for others with such unflinching generosity and nerissa exudes this well of love and gratitude, the way radhika has this never ending thoughtfulness and inaya has this quiet way of making others feel seen, the way kayla challenged my feelings of inadequacy early on after waste pickers, arguing that we did have something to offer these businesses beyond surface level, something to give in return. the way so many of you have so willingly engaged in discussion and growth together. you all have given and given and

given so much and i want to extend my deepest gratitude to y'all for the people you are and the parts of yourself that you brought to this trip.

at this point i want to share a song with yall, a bit of the second stanza of garden gate by one of my favorite artists monrovia

to me this song is about facades and social expectations and internal fears and bluffs and burdens creating these barriers to a whole and healthy relationship and community. it's about moving past superficial externalities to find true connection, taking off your gloves to handle the fresh soil and wilted leaves of another, of treating each person and relationship as carefully as a new life sprouting from the dirt, just as we've learned this trip to treat those plants more humanely.

the delicate musicality emphasizes the beautiful fragility of being known by another human and working through hardships and sin to build something green together.