

Section 1

#1: "The last streaks of sunlight slipped behind the trees, leaving the playground washed in a dim orange glow. The swings moved slightly, though no one was there to push them. Their slow creak broke the stillness, a sound too soft to belong to anyone but the wind."

Strengths: Your opening establishes atmosphere beautifully through sensory details. The personification of the swings and the contrast between visual and auditory imagery creates an engaging, immersive scene that draws readers in immediately.

Weakness: Lack of clarity about setting purpose

→ While your description of the playground is vivid, it's unclear early on why Mara is returning to this space. What emotional weight does this location carry? You mention the swings moving without anyone there, but the connection between this detail and Mara's later reflection isn't immediately evident. Adding a hint of purpose—even subtle—would deepen the reader's investment. For example, does she feel nostalgia, loss, or something else?

Exemplar: *"The swings moved slightly, though no one was there to push them—or perhaps there never would be again."*

#2: "The playground had once felt enormous to her. She remembered running from swing to swing, breathless, her laughter mingling with the laughter of others. Now it seemed smaller, like a photograph that had been left out in the sun too long. The colors had faded. The air felt too still."

Strengths: Your piece effectively uses contrast between past and present to show change and growth. The simile comparing the playground to a faded photograph is particularly effective and creates a poignant mood.

Weakness: Underdeveloped emotional specificity

→ Your writing tells us Mara feels the difference between then and now, but it doesn't quite show us *why* this matters deeply. What specific memory could anchor this feeling? The generalised reference to "laughter of others" is vague. Including one concrete detail—a friend's name, a particular game, or a moment of conflict—would transform this section from reflective into genuinely moving. Right now, the sentiment feels somewhat surface-level.

Exemplar: *"She remembered racing toward the swings, breathless, calling for Sophie to catch up, their laughter colliding in the summer air. Now Sophie's laugh existed only in memory."*

#3: "She watched it hover there, motionless, suspended between up and down. The sound of a car passing on the road beyond the trees made her lift her head, but the sound faded quickly, swallowed by the evening. The sky darkened until the colours ran together. One star appeared, faint but certain. Mara stood and walked toward the gate again."

Strengths: Your use of the seesaw as a symbol—suspended, waiting, incomplete—is sophisticated and works well thematically. The pacing of short sentences mirrors Mara's internal transition from stillness to action.

Weakness: Disconnected sensory elements lacking cohesion

→ Your final paragraphs contain beautiful individual images (the car sound, the star, the seesaw), but they don't feel firmly connected to one another or to Mara's emotional journey. The car passing seems incidental rather than meaningful. Why include it? What does it represent? Similarly, the sudden appearance of the star and Mara's decision to leave happen in quick succession without clear causation. Strengthening these connections would make the ending feel inevitable rather than episodic.

Exemplar: *"The sound of a car passing on the distant road reminded her that life continued elsewhere, in places where people still laughed together. She stood abruptly."*

■ Your piece demonstrates strong atmospheric writing and skilled use of symbolism through objects like the seesaw and the abandoned shoe. However, your writing would benefit from deeper emotional specificity rather than general reflectiveness. Right now, the piece feels like observing someone's melancholy rather than understanding its roots. To strengthen your work, consider adding concrete details about *why* Mara has returned to this playground and what memory or loss has prompted her visit. Additionally, ensure each image or scene transition connects directly to her emotional state—every element should serve her story, not just create mood. Finally, consider whether the ending truly resolves Mara's internal journey, or whether it simply ends her physical presence in the space. What has she discovered or accepted by leaving?

Score: 42/50

Section 2

The last streaks of sunlight slipped behind the trees, leaving the playground washed in a dim orange glow. The swings moved slightly, though no one was there to push them. Their slow creak broke the stillness, a

sound too soft to belong to anyone but the wind. A single shoe lay forgotten near the slide, one lace buried in the sand, its partner long gone. The air smelled faintly of rust and dry leaves.

Mara stepped through the gate, its hinges groaning as if they remembered her. The gravel crunched beneath her shoes, sharp and loud in the quiet. She looked at the slide first, then at the monkey bars where the paint had begun to peel. Her hand brushed one of the metal rungs. It was cold and rough beneath her fingers, colder than she expected.

The playground had once felt enormous to her. She remembered running from swing to swing, breathless, her laughter mingling with the laughter of others. Now it seemed smaller, like a photograph that had been left out in the sun too long. ~~The colors~~ [The colours] had faded. The air felt too still.

A single streetlight flickered to life, throwing a pale circle across the sandpit. Moths spiralled through the light and then disappeared into the deepening blue. Mara sat on the edge of the seesaw. It tilted slightly under her weight, the other end rising as though waiting for someone to take the opposite seat.

She watched it hover there, motionless, suspended between up and down. The sound of a car passing on the road beyond the trees made her lift her head, but the sound faded quickly, swallowed by the evening.

The sky darkened until the colours ran together. One star appeared, faint but certain. Mara stood and walked toward the gate again. For a moment she looked back at the playground. The swings had stopped moving. The silence was complete.

When she left, the gate closed behind her with a soft click. The empty playground waited, holding its breath, as if it knew she would not come back tomorrow.