

Rough Draft, with Peer Comments, Literacy Narrative (Nguyen)

Nguyen 1

Rough Draft

My family used to live in the heart of Hanoi, Vietnam. The neighborhood was small but swamped with crime. Drug addicts scoured the alleys and stole the most mundane things—old clothes, worn slippers, even license plates of motorbikes. Like anyone else in Vietnam in the '90s, we struggled with poverty. There was no entertainment device in our house aside from an 11" black-and-white television. Even then, electricity went off for hours on a weekly basis.

I was particularly close to a Vietnam War veteran. My parents were away a lot, so the old man became like a grandfather to me. He taught me how to ride a bicycle, how to read, how to take care of small pets. He worked sporadically from home, fixing bicycle tires and broken pedals. He was a wrinkly old man who didn't talk much. His vocal cords were damaged during the war, and it caused him pain to speak. In a neighborhood full of screaming babies and angry shop owners and slimy criminals, his home was my quiet haven. I could read and write and think and bond with someone whose worldliness came from his wordlessness.

The tiny house he lived in stood at the far end of our neighborhood. It always smelled of old clothes and forgotten memories. He was a slight man, but his piercing black eyes retained their intensity even after all these years. He must have made one fierce soldier.

"I almost died once," he said, dusting a picture frame. It was one of those rare instances he ever mentioned his life during the war. As he talked, I perched myself on the side of an armchair, rested my head on my tiny hands, and listened intently. I didn't understand much. I just liked hearing his low, humming voice. The concept of war for me was strictly confined to the classroom,

Comment [Alex F]:
Add a title to focus readers.

Comment [Brian S]:
You have great details here to set the scene in Hanoi, but why does it matter that you didn't have an "entertainment device"? Choose the most interesting among all these details.

Comment [Sameera K]:
I really like your introduction. It's so vivid. Think about adding a photo of your neighborhood so readers can relate. What does Hanoi look like?

Comment [Brian S]:
Worldliness came from wordlessness—great phrase! Is this part of your main idea? What is your main idea?

Comment [Sameera K]:
You do a good job of showing us why this Vietnam veteran was important to you, but it seems like this draft is more a story about the man and not about you.

and even then, the details of combat were always murky. The teachers just needed us to know that the communist troops enjoyed a glorious victory.

“I was the only survivor of my unit. 20 guys. All dead within a year. Then they let me go,” he said. His voice cracked a little and his eyes misted over as he stared at pictures from his combatant past. “We didn’t even live long enough to understand what we were fighting for.”

He finished the sentence with a drawn-out sigh, a small set of wrinkles gathering at the end of his eyes. Years later, as I thought about his stories, I started to wonder why he referred to his deceased comrades by the collective pronoun “we.” It was as if a little bit of him died on the battlefield with them too.

Three years after my family left the neighborhood, I learned that the old man became stricken with cancer. When I came home the next summer, I visited his house and sat by his sickbed. His shoulder-length mop of salt and pepper hair now dwarfed his rail-thin figure. We barely exchanged a word. He just held my hands tightly until my mother called for me to leave, his skeletal fingers leaving a mark on my pale palms. Perhaps he was trying to transmit to me some of his worldliness and his wisdom.

Perhaps he was telling me to go out into the world and live the free life he never had.

Some people say that writers are selfish and vain. The truth is, I learned to write because it gave me peace in the much too noisy world of my Vietnamese childhood. In the quiet of the old man’s house, I gazed out the window, listened to my thoughts, and wrote them down. It all started with a story about a wrinkly Vietnam War veteran who didn’t talk much.

Comment [Alex F]:
I like reading about this man, but I’m not sure what point you are making about literacy. Is the point that writing happens in quiet, not in noise?

Comment [Sameera K]:
I’m curious to hear more about you and why this man was so important to you. What did he teach you about writing? What did he see in you?

Comment [Alex F]:
This sentence is confusing. Your draft doesn’t seem to be about the selfishness or vanity of writers.

Comment [Brian S]:
What does “it” refer to? I think you’re trying to say something important here, but I’m not sure what it is.