

Thu Lam

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Biography

If I had to trace where my story begins, it would be somewhere between the sound of rain on Saigon rooftops and the hum of motorbikes rushing past the street from dusk till dawn. That rhythm – the soft chaos of home – has always followed me, even across oceans.

I grew up in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where my life was filled with lots of stories and experiences. Some were told through debate rounds, others through social projects and community work, but all of them began with curiosity: a quiet need to understand how people think, feel, and connect.

At 15, I was admitted into Le Hong Phong High School for the Gifted, one of Vietnam's most prestigious schools for exceptional students. It was there that I began to see how education could be more than grades and competitions. It became a way to discover who I wanted to be in the future. The school's rigor challenged me, but it also freed me: surrounded by brilliant classmates and devoted teachers. I learned to think independently, to take risks, and to turn ambition into action.

I was drawn to every space where my actions and ideas could support other people's development. As President of my high school's debate club, I learned that real persuasions begin with empathy, that the strongest arguments are built on understanding. By founding SON Project with my friends, I discovered how creativity could connect communities: designing jigsaw puzzles that celebrated Vietnamese culture while raising funds to support children in hospitals. Through SUGAR Vietnam, a youth-led organization aiding children in need, I learned that leadership is not always loud. Sometimes, it is quiet work – listening first, showing up, believing that even small acts of care can leave long echoes.

These high school experiences gave me the confidence to explore, the empathy to serve, and the curiosity and courage to dream beyond my city's skyline. But dreaming beyond also meant looking outward – toward new places and possibilities that could challenge and develop me more. Choosing to leave Vietnam for college was not about escaping. It was my hope to return with more to give. I wanted to see how ideas could live in a different language, how communities could be built across cultures, and how my voice – shaped by Vietnamese values of resilience, humility, and warmth – could find space in a large world.

When I came to the United States for UGA, I carried that same drive – to bridge cultures, ideas, and people. Being an international student means constantly translating the world: not just between languages, but also between ways of thinking and feeling. Some days, it is a challenge to speak with confidence, to belong, to find my rhythm again. Other days, it feels like a gift to live in two worlds at once, to see beauty in difference, to realize that identity can stretch without breaking. Studying abroad has taught me to find strength in adaption and pride in heritage – to stay rooted even while reaching far.

Vietnam taught me that care can be quiet, that hard work is a kind of language, and that stories matter most when they uplift others. That's why I write – to explore the space between where I come from and where I am living now, to make sense of distance and belonging, and to celebrate the small ways people create meaning in movement.

So, who am I?

My name is Thu Lam – or Lâm Anh Thư in Vietnamese. I carry both names the way I carry both worlds: one rooted in my own identity and heritage, the other reaching the global horizon. I aspire to pay forward what I have been given – using my skills and experiences to guide others the way mentors once guided me. Whether through community work, storytelling, or simple acts of kindness, I want to create connections that cross borders and generations. Because to me, success is not measured by how far I go, but by how many others I can bring along the way.



Reflective Essay

When I look back at the beginning of this semester, I see a version of myself who was still afraid of English—afraid of sounding wrong, afraid of revealing too much, afraid that my real thoughts would dissolve somewhere between Vietnamese and English. As an international student, I often felt that writing in English was a test, not a tool. It demanded correctness before honesty, fluency before feeling. I approached language cautiously, like walking across thin ice. I worried that any misstep would expose what I lacked rather than express who I was.

What I did not expect was that writing—especially writing in English—would become not a task to survive, but a space to belong. Now, as I assemble this portfolio, I realize something astonishing: English did not dilute my identity. It amplified it. Each essay became not just an academic submission, but a bridge—between countries, between generations, and between the person I used to be and the one I am becoming.

This reflection traces that transformation. My portfolio is not simply a collection of assignments; it is a narrative of discovery. The three core pieces in it—my personal essay, my interview essay, and my Wild Card micro-memoir—document different stages of growth. They chart how I moved from restraint to vulnerability, from self-doubt to authorship, and from silence to voice.

Essay One: Learning to Let My Story Speak

The journey began with my personal essay. I remember the hesitation vividly: a blinking cursor, an empty page, and a heart full of stories I was not sure I deserved to tell. Writing about homesickness was something I rarely did even in Vietnamese. To put those emotions into English felt like crossing a border without knowing whether the other side would welcome me.

At first, I wrote as if I needed permission. I softened my emotions, fearing that they were either too dramatic or too foreign for an English-speaking audience. I second-guessed every image, every cultural reference. I almost removed the opening paragraph about Tet celebrations—the smells, colors, and rituals of Vietnamese New Year—because I worried no one would understand it.

Then came peer review.

One classmate told me the Tet scene was her favorite part. Not because she had experienced Tet, but because it allowed her to see my world. That single comment transformed something fundamental in me. It showed me that cultural specificity is not a barrier; it is an invitation. Readers are not asking for universality. They are asking for truth.

Revision became an act of trust. I slowed my pacing. I let sensory details carry emotion instead of explaining it. For the first time, English felt less like armor and more like breath. By the time I finished the essay, I no longer felt like I was performing English. I felt like I was speaking in it.

Essay One taught me my first lesson of the semester:
My voice does not need permission—it needs space.

Essay Two: When Revision Became Revelation

If Essay One helped me claim my voice, Essay Two forced me to understand what it means to carry it responsibly. The interview essay was not merely challenging—it was transformative.

I began it the way I had been taught to begin research assignments: gather information, document facts, recount events. I interviewed my grandmother about my uncle, who died in the Vietnam War before I was born. My early draft was technically competent—clear, organized, even polished—but emotionally hollow. I treated my grandmother like a historical source, not a human being.

It took rereading my draft to recognize what I had done: I had built walls where I needed windows. I was afraid of touching grief that did not belong to me. I confused emotional distance with respect. But distance did not honor her story. It erased it.

The turning point came unexpectedly.

I watched the interview recording again—not for information, but for the silences. The pauses between her sentences held more truth than her words. Her hands trembled when she spoke of her son; her voice softened when she

repeated his name; her gaze shifted to a corner of the room as though memory lived there.

That was when I understood:

I was not documenting a story. I was inheriting one.

The revision process became something I had never experienced before. It was not editing—it was excavation. I rewrote entire sections, not because they were wrong, but because they were incomplete. I added new scenes. I removed sentences that narrated but did not feel. I crafted metaphors to hold the weight of silence. The essay changed shape—from a biography into a bridge.

The most dramatic transformation happened in the conclusion. My first version ended with a factual summary. The final version ends with me confronting the lineage of sacrifice:

“I, who left home to study, could only do so because she once stood in a doorway, steadying herself against the loss of a child.”

That sentence was not written—it was discovered. It arrived after hours of revisiting the interview, after tears I did not expect, after realizing that the life I am living now is built upon choices I did not witness and sacrifices that I did not make.

This essay taught me the most important truth of the semester:

Revision is not decoration. Revision is revelation.

Wild Card: Returning Home Through Memory

My Wild Card piece—a micro-memoir about Saigon—completes the arc of my portfolio. If the interview essay excavated the past, this memoir anchored me in place. Saigon is not just a city; it is the rhythm of my childhood, the backdrop of my becoming. Writing about it felt like returning home with new eyes.

In drafting this piece, I focused on sensory detail—not as decoration, but as evidence of belonging. The streets lined with motorbikes, the scent of grilled

meat rising through humidity, the cacophony of voices that fill every alley—these details were not scenery. They were identity.

The revision process for this piece was different from the others. It was not about uncovering hidden meaning or confronting silence. It was about precision: choosing the right sound, the right image, the right breath. If the interview essay opened my chest, the Saigon memoir steadied my heartbeat.

Together, these three works form a trio of realizations:
voice, lineage, and place—the three things I once feared English could never hold for me.

Where I Stand Now

Looking back, I see not just progress, but transformation. I no longer approach English as an intruder seeking permission. I approach it as a participant—with agency, curiosity, and confidence. Writing has become the place where my languages touch without competing, where my past informs my present, where memory meets possibility.

I used to think writing was something I had to get right. Now I understand:

Writing is something I grow through.

And as I close this semester, I do not simply feel like a more skilled writer. I feel braver. My essays helped me cross borders—linguistic, emotional, generational—and I know there are more ahead.

But unlike the version of myself who started this journey, I am not afraid of the crossing anymore.

I am ready.

Ready to carry my stories.

Ready to build new bridges.

Ready to write my way forward.

Essay #1 – Personal Essay

A Message Across Oceans

Thu Lam

Vietnamese Lunar New Year or Tết was always a reset for an upcoming new year. Every year, the same sequence unfolded: the air smelled of firecrackers and candied ginger, the whole neighborhood buzzing with red banners and laughter spilling from houses. For me, the first morning of Tết began with the sound of sweeping. Before dawn, my grandmother's broom whispered across the courtyard, brushing away the old year to welcome the new one. Inside, I stood on tiptoe in front of the ancestor altar, trying not to spill as I poured tea into porcelain cups. The air smelled sharp and sweet from yellow apricot blossoms. As I set the cup down, my grandmother leaned close, her voice steady: ***“Uống nước nhớ nguồn.”*** She explained it for me: when you drink water, remember its source.

At ten, I did not really get it. To me, the altar was mostly fruit stacked into pyramids, red envelopes I couldn't wait to open, and incense smoke curling toward the ceiling. Still, the words stuck, lingering like incense in the room.

As I grew older, the saying followed me. My parents would bring it up when reminding me about the sacrifices of our ancestors. Slowly, I started to see what it meant. It was about noticing the roots under everything - the gratitude for what came before each joy, each success.

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That idea of roots followed me into high school, where I found myself searching for ways to make tradition more tangible for others, through my SON Project. One afternoon, I was sitting with a jigsaw puzzle and realized how each random piece - awkward on its own - fit into something larger. I thought, why not puzzles that told stories of Vietnam? Piece by piece: Đông Hồ folk paintings, the tale of the Trưng Sisters, the curved roofs of Huế temples. I pulled together a team of ten, and we started designing puzzles paired with story cards. Families could sit together, laugh, and rebuild bits of culture with their own hands.

I still remember the day we sold our first set. We earned our first profit and decided to donate the money to buy toys and gifts for kids in a hospital. When

I watched their small hands fit pieces of a puzzle into place, I felt my grandmother's words all over again. ***“Uống nước nhớ nguồn”*** was not just about looking back. It was about carrying forward what had nourished me to nourish others.

Then I left Vietnam. Carrying the belief that a brighter academic and career path awaited me in the United States. I told myself opportunity lived across the ocean, and that by leaving, I was choosing growth.

Before I left Vietnam, I imagined I would be fine. I thought I had packed enough: jars of coffee, photos of my family, and a heart steady with excitement. But expectation and reality rarely match. No suitcase can hold the warmth of your father's nagging or the sound of your city's chaos. That gap was where loneliness seeped in.

Flying into Atlanta airport, I pressed my forehead to the window, taking in the glow of the city beneath me. It was my first time in the United States, and from above, the streets curled outward like veins, full of promise I had only imagined until now. I thought I was ready for this new chapter of life. When I came to Athens for UGA, the proverb felt blurred, my expectation unravelling. My first months here felt like moving into a house without walls. The streets were too quiet compared to Saigon's motorbike symphony. Nights were cold and stretched too long. In the cafeteria, the food lined up in silver trays, familiar only in shapes, never in taste. And my English? It sounded heavy and clumsy. My classmates smiled, but I wondered if they noticed the pauses more than my words.

Homesickness didn't crash down in one wave. It seeped in like water through cracks: in the quiet of my dorm, in the flatness of cafeteria rice, in the absence of my father's nagging or my brother's teasing. I found myself asking: if remembering the source is so important, what happens when the source feels unreachable? In those moments of doubt, I heard my grandmother's voice again. ***“Remember the source”***. The source was not just Vietnam itself. It was my grandmother's hands steady over the broom taking care of our home, my parents' voices switching between laughter and worry late at night as they are still figuring out how to afford for my study abroad. It was their resilience, flowing quietly into me. I began to wonder: is identity something we can carry whole, or is it only fragments we gather and rebuild? Could resilience itself be the bridge, stronger than language or distance? These questions kept me searching, even on the hardest nights.

I started making new rituals to refresh my mind. On weekends, I borrowed the dorm kitchen with friends and tried cooking Vietnamese dishes using whatever we could find - spring rolls with tortillas instead of rice paper, phở that tasted more like cinnamon. We laughed at the results, but as we ate, I realized these makeshift dishes still carried the heart of home. The food never fooled anyone - tortillas tore too fast, cinnamon overwhelmed the broth - but the joy was real. In those mismatched ingredients, I saw how traditions survive: not in perfect imitation, but in the laughter and connection they spark. That discovery felt just as nourishing as any meal I had left behind.

That was when the proverb revealed itself again, not as command but as compass. To remember the source is not to stay in one place. It is to carry its essence forward - the gratitude, the resilience, the belonging - into new chapters, even ones that feel unfinished.

I began to see identity less as a fixed shape and more as a puzzle in progress. Some pieces come from Vietnam: the courtyard at dawn, my grandmother's steady voice, the swirl of incense. Others come from America: cinnamon-laced phở, late-night conversations in borrowed kitchens, a new kind of belonging. Together, they create a picture that is still forming, but unmistakably mine.

Meals end. Blossoms fade. Years turn. But self-belief? That stays. I bring it into classrooms, into friendships, into communities no distance can erase. Like the puzzles I once designed, each fragment of experience clicks into something larger: the pride of being Vietnamese.

Rooted, unfinished, and ready.

Essay #2 – Interview Essay

Beneath the Silence of Peace

Thu Lam

I did not grow up thinking of my grandmother as a woman shaped by war. I knew her mostly by the soft scrape of her sandals on the tiled floor, the smell of herbal tea she boiled for everyone when someone was sick, the way she hummed while washing rice. Only in brief, fragile moments—when chores settled or rain softened the evening—would a piece of her past slip out. She never told a full story. Instead, she left small openings. A sentence. A name. A silence where memory lived.

One of those openings was my uncle.

He went to war when he was barely older than I am now. He never came home. When the story was told to me as a child, it did not carry the weight of tragedy. It was simply something that “had happened,” the way history books summarize loss with a single line. I remember my mother saying that when soldiers arrived in the village to recruit young men, my grandmother did not cry. She folded his uniform. She packed rice and dried fish. She wrote a note—*Go, my son. Wherever you are, my heart will be with you.*

Then she sent him away with words I never understood:

“Go bravely. The country needs you more than I do.”

For years, that line felt impossibly distant, too large to belong to the woman who tucked candy into my pockets when my mother wasn’t looking. It was as if her courage lived in another world entirely.

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I did not understand her until I left home too.

Months into my first year studying abroad, I began missing home in a way that scared me. I missed things I did not even know I cared about—the hiss of the rice cooker at dusk, the chorus of motorbikes outside the window, the warm, humid air that clung to every evening. In this new place, surrounded by

English, fluorescent dorm lights, and unfamiliar expectations, I felt myself stretching and thinning, like a thread pulled too tight.

Homesickness is a strange thing—it makes you remember people not as they are, but as the anchors they once were.

So, I found myself thinking about my grandmother. About her strength. About that impossible decision she made. I wanted to know the part of her story she never told, and maybe, selfishly, I wanted to know something about myself too.

What do we inherit from the people who survive the unimaginable?

One evening—rain striking the window like a memory—I called her.

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The video flickered once, twice. Then she appeared. Thinner. Quieter. Her eyes still sharp.

Suddenly, across the ocean, I felt like the little girl who once knelt by her side, shelling mung beans for Vietnamese New Year cakes. My rehearsed language dissolved. So did all the questions I thought I knew how to ask.

“Con muốn biết... sao bà lại để cậu đi bộ đội?”

“I want to know... why did you let my uncle join the army?”

There it was—the question that had lived inside me like a stone.

I could have asked about her childhood, her years after the war, how she raised seven children with nothing but willpower and thin rice porridge. Instead, I asked about the son she lost. The one whose name floated through family gatherings like incense smoke—present, but untouchable.

She inhaled slowly, her breath a long, trembling thread.

“Vì đất nước cần. Và vì chúng ta phải có nghĩa vụ đấu tranh cho độc lập. Cậu con muốn đi... và bà biết, nếu không bây giờ, thì bao giờ đây?”

“Because the country needed him. And because we all have a duty to fight for independence. My son wanted to go... and I knew if not now, then when?”

Her voice was steady. Her fingers, though, twisted the edge of her sleeve.

For the first time, she felt like a character I had not fully met—one whose edges were sharper, whose shadow stretched farther than I had imagined. A woman strong enough to let her son walk into danger because she believed his life was part of something larger than any single heart could hold.

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“Lúc đó bà có khóc không?”

“Grandma... did you cry that day?”

She shook her head.

“Không, con à. Nếu khóc thì cậu con sẽ sợ.

Nước mắt là thứ mình giữ lại sau lưng.”

“No, my child. If I cried, your uncle would have been afraid. Tears are something you keep behind you.”

The screen went quiet. Even the rain on my window seemed to pause.

This was the moment when something shifted—when the story of my grandmother was no longer something handed down to me, but something I stepped into. I realized she was not just being interviewed. She was letting me into a room of her life she had kept closed for decades.

And I, miles away, was trying to understand what kind of strength demands the sacrifice of one fear to protect another.

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She told me how the village looked that day: young men lined up like reeds in the wind, dust rising around their feet, mothers calling out names one last time. She folded his clothes. Smoothed his collar. Pressed her palm against his back, memorizing the shape of him.

Then he left.

Days stretched into months. Months into years. She raised the other children with hands made of equal parts tenderness and iron. She guarded her grief the way others guarded valuables—hidden, quiet, but always nearby.

When I asked what she thought when she learned he would never return, she looked away.

***“Buồn lắm con ạ... Bà chỉ muốn đi theo cậu con thôi.
Nhưng bà phải sống. Phải nuôi những đứa con còn lại.
Bà tin rằng hòa bình sẽ đến.”***

“I was so sad. I wanted to follow him.

But I had to live. I had to raise the children who were still small.

I believed peace would come.”

Her voice trembled for the first time.

And suddenly, I understood something I had never realized:

My grandmother did not survive the war because she was fearless.

She survived because she decided fear was something she would face *after* doing what needed to be done.

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Looking at her across the screen, I felt the quiet lineage between us.

She sent her son to war.

My mother sent me into a foreign future.

Different battles.

Different losses.

But the same trembling hope.

I had left home with a suitcase full of books and dreams. She had sent her son away with rice folded in banana leaves. But the emotional weight—fear, pride, love—echoed across generations like a held breath.

In that moment, I realized the story I was writing was not just about patriotism or war. It was about inheritance. About what we carry unknowingly, stitched into our bones by the women who came before us.

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When the screen went dark, I didn't move.

My reflection hovered where her face had been. Two outlines overlapping—one shaped by war, one shaped by distance. I felt the urgency of writing, not as an academic task, but as a responsibility.

I returned to my desk. Opened my notebook. And began to write.

Not to retell history, but to understand it.

Not to honor my grandmother, but to meet her.

Not to resurrect my uncle, but to carry forward the meaning of his short, brave life.

Because I realized something then:

Her sacrifices built the world that allowed mine to exist.

Her courage made space for my choices.

Her grief made room for my freedom.

I, who left home to study, could only do so because she once stood in a doorway, steadying herself against the loss of a child.

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I return often to the only part of my uncle that remains: his handwriting. In one of the letters that he sent home in 1972, he wrote:

“Hôm nay, khi nghĩ về chặng đường phía trước, con tự hỏi liệu mình có còn cơ hội trở về nhà hay không. Nếu đến ngày kháng chiến kết thúc mà con vẫn chưa về, con mong Mẹ đừng khóc. Con muốn Mẹ mỉm cười tự hào, biết rằng con trai của Mẹ đã sống trọn vẹn một đời tuổi trẻ. Con đã gửi thanh xuân của mình cho tự do của đất nước, và con chưa bao giờ hối tiếc về điều đó. Với con, chẳng có gì đẹp đẽ hơn thế.”

“Today, as I think about the road ahead, I find myself wondering whether I’ll ever make it home again. If the war ends and I’m still not among those who return, I hope Mom won’t cry. I hope you can smile proudly, knowing your son spent his youth fully and without regret. I gave the best years of my life to the freedom of our homeland, and I have never once wished it otherwise. For me, there is nothing more beautiful than that.”

His words feel impossibly large now. But they also feel familiar.

Because when I left home, my mother put her hand on my back in the same gentle gesture my grandmother once used. And I understood then those departures—whether into war or into the unknown—are always threaded with love.

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Writing this, I feel the urgency spoken of. The tension. The inheritance. The quiet heroism of women whose names rarely appear in history books.

War did not make my grandmother extraordinary.

Her endurance, her choices, her love—that's what shaped us.

Her silence did not hide weakness.

It carried the weight of seven children and one empty space in her heart.

Somewhere inside me, her strength lives on.

Not loud.

Not dramatic.

But steady.

And maybe that's what I was really searching for that night when I called her—not the story of a son who left, but the story of a mother who stayed.

Revision Exhibit

For a long time, I thought revision meant correction — trimming sentences, fixing grammar, and tightening phrasing. But through this course, I’ve come to understand that true revision is far more introspective. It’s a process of *re-seeing* what I meant to say in the first place and learning how to bring the emotional truth of an experience into clearer focus. When I revise now, I’m not just editing for clarity — I’m trying to listen more closely to my own voice, to what the story wants to say. Sometimes that means cutting entire sentences that sounded “pretty” but said nothing real. Other times, it means slowing down to add sensory detail, or to let an emotion breathe on the page.

The section I chose for this Revision Exhibit — the ending of my essay “*Beneath the Silence of Peace*” — changed the most throughout my drafting process. In early drafts, I struggled to articulate what my grandmother’s story *meant* to me. I could describe her bravery, but I hadn’t yet connected it to my own life in a meaningful way. The revision process helped me find that bridge — to see how her sacrifice across generations and oceans shaped the person I have become. I learned to balance historical reflection with personal resonance, transforming the ending from something distant and solemn into something alive, connective, and forward-looking.

This passage is a good example of how I’ve grown as a writer because it demonstrates how revision can turn abstract ideas into lived emotion. In the first draft, I focused on ideas like patriotism and resilience, but they floated above the page; in later drafts, I grounded them through imagery — the rice bag, the note, the act of leaving home. Those revisions gave the story its heartbeat. Looking back, I realize that revision taught me not just how to improve my writing, but how to better understand my own experiences — how to shape memory into meaning, and reflection into something that reaches others.

Draft 1 – early draft (raw, exploratory)

When the call ended, I lingered on the screen, reluctant to let go of her presence, of the bridge she had offered me across decades and oceans. War, I

realized, is more than battles and strategy. It is lived in each household, in each moment of quiet resolve. Patriotism is not a flag waved in ceremony, but the willingness to put everything on the line for the country, for family, for the unknown future. And women — mothers, grandmothers, wives — are the quiet pillars that hold the nation's story together, often without recognition, always with courage.

I returned to my desk, my notebook open, fingers hovering over the keys. I began to write, not just to recount history, but to carry it forward. To honor the sacrifices, to understand the choices, to breathe life into the quiet strength that had shaped me long before I knew her story fully. Each word felt like a conversation across time, a bridge between her bravery and my reflection, a reminder that some lessons cannot be taught in classrooms but must be learned at the kitchen table, through stories whispered and words softly spoken, carried across oceans, and preserved in memory.

Commentary:

This first draft captures the emotion and lyrical tone I wanted, but it's still distant — my grandmother's story feels abstract. I focused on thematic ideas (patriotism, sacrifice, memory) rather than showing how those ideas connected personally to me. The language was poetic, but the lack of concrete grounding made it sound generalized. At this stage, I was still writing to understand what the story *meant* to me, rather than how to *communicate* that meaning to others. The insight was there, but the emotional thread was too faint.

Draft 2 – middle draft (structural and rhetorical focus)

When the call ended, I lingered on the screen, seeing my reflection overlap with hers — two generations divided by distance but bound by courage. I imagined her packing that bag again, her quiet strength echoing in every beat of my heart. Patriotism is not a flag waved in ceremony, but the willingness to put everything on the line for the country, for family, for the unknown future. And women — mothers, grandmothers, wives — are the quiet pillars that hold the nation's story together, often without recognition, always with courage.

I returned to my desk, my notebook open, fingers hovering over the keys. I began to write, not just to recount history, but to carry it forward. To honor the sacrifices, to understand the choices, to breathe life into the quiet strength that had shaped me long before I knew her story fully. My grandmother and uncle's sacrifices helped bring peace and independence to a country that once trembled with fear. Because of them, I grew up in a place where books replaced bullets, and dreams replaced silence. Years later, I would pack my own bag — not with rice and letters, but with notebooks and dreams — and leave home for a different kind of battle. Their courage built the world that allowed mine to take shape.

Commentary:

In this middle draft, I worked on *connecting reflection with narrative*. I replaced the vague image of “a bridge across decades and oceans” with the more tangible metaphor of “seeing my reflection overlap with hers.” This not only visualized our connection but also emphasized generational continuity.

I also added the line about “books replacing bullets” and “dreams replacing silence,” which grounded the abstract patriotism in lived experience.

Structurally, I linked my grandmother's and uncle's sacrifices directly to my own act of leaving home to study abroad. This revision marked a turning point — instead of observing her story from afar, I began to inhabit it, making the essay more personal, layered, and emotionally immediate.

Final draft – polished version

When the screen went dark, I didn't move.

My reflection hovered where her face had been. Two outlines overlapping—one shaped by war, one shaped by distance. I felt the urgency of writing, not as an academic task, but as a responsibility.

I returned to my desk. Opened my notebook. And began to write.

Not to retell history, but to understand it.

Not to honor my grandmother, but to meet her.

Not to resurrect my uncle, but to carry forward the meaning of his short, brave life.

Because I realized something then:

Her sacrifices built the world that allowed mine to exist.

Her courage made space for my choices.

Her grief made room for my freedom.

I, who left home to study, could only do so because she once stood in a doorway, steadying herself against the loss of a child.

Commentary:

In this revision, I focused on deepening intimacy and immediacy by centering both my grandmother and my own experience. The essay opens with a precise, sensory moment— “When the screen went dark, I didn’t move”— allowing readers to inhabit the space of reflection and connection across generations. This revision strengthens characterization, portraying my grandmother not just through narrative summary but through her influence on my life, emphasizing the link between her sacrifices and the freedom that allowed me to study abroad.

I also revised for rhythm and clarity, using short, declarative sentences to create urgency and mirror the contemplative tone of the essay. My presence in the narrative is more active, showing how her story shapes my own understanding of courage, sacrifice, and love.

Overall, this revision transforms earlier, more abstract drafts into a cohesive, emotionally engaging narrative, balancing reflection, historical context, and personal insight while highlighting the enduring impact of my grandmother’s courage on my life.

Peer Review Exhibit

At the beginning of the semester, I struggled with the peer review process. I often found it difficult to balance honesty with kindness — I wanted to help my peers improve, but I was afraid of sounding too harsh or overly critical. My early feedback tended to focus on grammar or surface-level suggestions because I was not yet confident about commenting on deeper issues like structure, tone, or purpose. Over time, however, I learned that peer review is not about evaluating someone's writing from a position of judgement; it is about entering a shared conversation where both readers and writers learn from each other.

As I became more comfortable, I started approaching peer review as a collaborative dialogue rather than a critique. I realized that meaningful feedback should not only point out weaknesses but also identify moments of strength, emotional depth, or clarity. My comments began to focus on how a piece *works* — how tone, imagery, and reflection shape the reader's experience — and what possibilities exist for further development. Instead of giving directives, I began asking open-ended questions that invite the writer to think more deeply about their choices.

Now, my peer review process follows a consistent pattern. I start by noting what engages me as a reader, what feels alive or emotionally resonant. Then, I move toward constructive suggestions, often framed as questions about meaning, intention, or connection. This approach allows feedback to feel less like correction and more like collaboration.

The review that follows is a strong example of how my feedback style has evolved. It was written for a classmate's second draft of an interview-based essay about a late-night FaceTime call between the writer and her cousin, a medical resident. I was drawn to the essay's emotional intimacy but noticed that it focused more on the cousin's story than on the writer's internal journey. My feedback therefore centered on encouraging deeper self-reflection and connection to purpose — while maintaining the warmth and narrative flow that made the essay compelling.

This review illustrates how I now see peer feedback as a process of mutual growth. By engaging carefully and compassionately with another writer's

work, I not only help them strengthen their piece but also sharpen my own awareness of how writing creates meaning.

Key:

Interesting part – green

Not-so-interesting part - yellow

The FaceTime call connected after 3 rings. There she was: dressed in navy scrubs, hair tied in a low pony, stethoscope around the neck, and her hospital ID badge that read “Elise Liu” clipped on the front pocket. At first glance, all I could notice was her dark eye bags, faint smile, and the exhaustion in her voice. Her face was lit by the bright overhead lights with the dark, empty hospital hallway behind her, silence filling the room. It was late, and I could tell it had been a long day for her. While others rested, she was still typing away on her desktop, working hard on her last year of residency in pediatrics.

That night, I spoke to my cousin, one who endured years of restless nights, sacrifice, and perseverance. cliché --> Try to “show” this instead through specific examples of moments she endured.

To kick off the conversation, I asked her the big why.

“Why did you choose medicine out of all fields?” I asked as I hit record on my phone.

It wasn’t an immediate answer. Her gaze softened as her mind sank into deep thought. “Science is beautiful; it will always take the gold medal,” she said finally. “It holds the power to cure anyone and anything, some just undiscovered at the moment. Science takes time, and we never stop learning in the field of science. dialogue integration feels a bit formal/clunky ”

Her words struck me. As much as I dislike taking science courses, more specific I realized just how much science shapes the world. I thought of all the vaccines, medicine, and cures we rely on today to combat all types of diseases and disorders. I imagined those disorders once deemed incurable to now having a cure because someone persevered with their research. I finally understood why science is so tedious. All the nights I complained about memorizing polyatomic ions, scientists were experimenting in labs, working hard towards something greater. Scientists, doctors, nurses, and anyone in the medical field truly deserve a gold medal.

She continued, as the corners of her lips slowly curled up, "Doctors bear a great responsibility in giving hope to patients and their families. Seeing a smile on their face is like a reward."

Her eyes looked around, trying to replay a memory, "I remember seeing this one little girl who came in crying." love this great sensory paragraph At the end of my visit, a big smile stretched across her face, showing her one missing front tooth. I offered her a cotton candy-flavored lollipop, and her little arms wrapped around my knees, hugging me tightly. Every follow-up visit, she'd always greet me with a big, warm hug, telling me stories from her school. Moments like these get me through the night. Suddenly, everything feels worth it. Working with real lives is not easy, and that's what I love about my job. I enjoy a sense of accomplishment knowing I've contributed something to the world."

As she spoke, every word carried passion and ambition. Her answers said something about her: she was someone with a story. That's how I knew this was not just a job to her; it was her purpose.

I asked next, "Were there moments you had doubts about what you were doing?"

She nodded immediately. "Yes, but there was no time to hit pause on life. I knew there was no going back." She took a deep breath in, fidgeting with the pen in her hand as she spoke. She began to describe the restless nights before exams, the tears that came from overwhelming stress, the missed holidays with family, and the life she put on hold to pursue higher education.

She painted a picture in my head. "I sit alone at my desk, the room filled by the sound of the clock ticking in the back." lovely visual, feels cinematic It's 4 a.m., and textbooks are piled high on the table, ready for me to read. As I trace the diagrams onto my notebook, I see the paper is wrinkled by the evident tear stains and smudged eraser marks. Oftentimes, I feel defeated and devastated Specifics? --> What's an example of a night she almost gave up? . Mental exhaustion is what I would call it."

I felt a similar taste to what she described: pulling an all-nighter before exams and on the verge of pulling my hair out as I tried to learn how to solve acid-base reaction problems. However, mine was never as serious because I'm merely chasing a letter grade on my chemistry exam. Hers carried real stakes: people's lives.

“Sometimes I wonder if life would be better if I chose a different route. But then I remembered: I chose this road. I owe it to the girl who dreamed of becoming a doctor beautiful. Having doubts is normal, but letting them take control isn’t.”

I followed, “What kept you going through those moments of doubt and challenge?”

She thought for a quick second and responded with a one-word answer: people.

It was a broad term, but somehow very specific. Her voice softened, “My family who supports me, my friends who study alongside me, and my patients who depend on me. I can’t bear to let so many people down.”

It’s the tears of joy in the family’s eyes, the big smile of the patient, and the amount of gratitude she received that pushed her through when everything felt heavy. It reminded her of why she chose medicine in the first place. She knew she was making an impact and that was enough to keep her going.

Just when I was about to ask her the next question, I heard an echoing voice calling her name in the background of our call.

She looks behind her down the hallway and replies, “Coming!”

She turns back at the camera and says her last words of encouragement to me: “Don’t feel the need to have everything planned out right now. You’re only a freshman in college. Don’t get upset when things don’t work out as planned. Life is all about learning and experiencing. Keep up the good work, Kayleigh. One day you’ll stand where I am.”

The call ends, and my screen fades to black, but her words remain engraved in my head.

I had called Elise, curious about her path in medicine, trying to find clarity about my own future. Hearing her talk about the doubts, the sacrifices, and the constant push forward let me know that this wasn’t just about medicine. It was about purpose.

This applies to anyone who has ever pursued anything that felt out of reach. Her story is about resilience and perseverance cliché pairings, even when life hits hard. There are people who choose to stay in the shadows and people who fly towards the sun, knowing their wings might burn but believing the flight will be worth it poetic! . Elise is the latter. I aspire to be like her, bold enough to take flight and live life one step at a time.

Holistic Comments

1. Does the opening of the essay give you a sense of discovery? What could be done to strengthen this, given the topic and what's on the page so far?

Yes — the opening absolutely gives a sense of discovery. The FaceTime scene feels cinematic and immediately sets a tone of intimacy and curiosity. You could strengthen this by clarifying your motive for calling her earlier — what kind of uncertainty or personal struggle were you hoping to clarify through this conversation? That would make your “discovery” arc more pronounced.

2. On the opening page, has the writer sufficiently established the basic orienting facts that you need in order to fall into the essay & have deep bearings on what's going on, where this is coming from, why it matters, etc.

You establish the situation well (late-night call, cousin in residency, narrator curious about her journey). However, it might help to clarify *your own position* a bit earlier

3. What sense of stakes do you get in the essay? What sorts of stakes are there, and how high are they? Consider how you might make suggestions that might genuinely increase the stakes, tension, and blood circulation for readers...if the topic does not carry much conflict, make suggestions to help your partner deepen the emotional resonance of the topic or its basic relevance to readers.

The stakes here are internal — about self-discovery and finding purpose. They're modest but meaningful. To raise the stakes, you might show more about *your internal conflict*: what kind of uncertainty or fear about your future made you reach out to Elise? This would deepen emotional resonance and tension, even without external conflict.

4. How do you connect with the essay? (What do you see as the common ground?)

I connect with the essay through the universal theme of questioning one's purpose and admiring someone's perseverance. The cousin's vulnerability makes the piece relatable — most people have an “Elise” in their life who inspires them.

5. How do you not connect with the essay? What would help you connect more, specifically?

At times, the essay feels more *about Elise* than *about you*. I'd love to see a stronger thread of your own reflection interwoven throughout, especially moments where her words trigger self-recognition or challenge your own mindset.

6. Given the writer's focus, how could it be connected to a wider audience? Are there any particular moments in the essay that help it to "open up?" Any that hinder this?

The essay opens up beautifully in the last few paragraphs — the reflection on "people who fly toward the sun" makes it feel universal. To make it even broader, you could highlight how Elise's story taught you something about *your approach to challenges*, not just admiration for hers.

7. With audience awareness in mind: is it clear that the writer has envisioned a broad readership in the way the essay is crafted? If there is anything that gives you pause here, what is it? How might it be remedied?

The essay feels like it's written for an educated general audience — clear, descriptive, and thoughtful. If anything, the tone sometimes leans a little formal, which can be softened to sound more conversational and human. That would widen its appeal.

8. Ask the writer a series of questions or a central question that you feel you need to answer to. Then explain why the questions are important on your reading of the essay as a whole.

- What specifically motivated you to call Elise that night?
- Did something in your own academic life make you think of her?
- How did her advice ("Don't feel the need to have everything planned out") change how you view your own path?

These questions matter because answering them would tie your reflection and Elise's story together more tightly, making the essay feel less like a profile and more like a shared journey.

9. If you could only make ONE suggestion for making this essay more compelling, fully-realized, and interesting for a wide literary audience, what would it be? What would the starting point look like, in the writing itself?

Add more of you — let the essay be not just about Elise's purpose but about how her story shapes yours. Maybe end with a brief moment of action or thought that shows how you've applied her advice — something small but personal (e.g., a moment you felt lost but remembered her words).

Wild Card Essay

Saigon, My Pulse

Thu Lam

Morning in Saigon never begins quietly. Even before the sun lifts itself over the city, motorbikes rattle to life in the alley behind my grandmother's apartment, each engine a small heartbeat joining the larger rhythm of the streets. I grew up learning to walk in step with this rhythm—dodging scooters, slipping between crowds, balancing my breath between the smell of exhaust and the drifting scent of freshly steamed bánh mì.

My mother and I used to walk to the neighborhood market at dawn, when the air was still cool enough to touch without flinching. Vendors arranged baskets of morning glory, beans, herbs, and fruit with quick, practiced hands. Their voices rose in a cheerful chorus: "*Cải ngọt mới hái đây! Bánh bao nóng! Trà đá đây!*"— "*Fresh morning greens! Hot buns! Iced tea, get your iced tea here!*". Those calls were the soundtrack of my childhood—reliable, rhythmic, and impossibly alive. There was a street vendor, a small woman with the softest eyes, who always saved the last warm chewy mung bean layered cake (bánh da lợn) for me. She'd slide it into a little plastic bag and wink, as if she and the city shared a secret about looking after me.

By noon, Saigon transformed. Heat settled onto the streets like a second skin. Shadows shrank beneath the roar of traffic, and the air tasted like metal and dust. My friends and I sought shelter in the corner café with whirring ceiling fans, where the smell of roasted coffee beans clung to our clothes. We sipped Vietnamese iced coffee (cà phê sữa đá) slowly, letting the condensed milk soften the bitterness on our tongues. Outside, motorbikes flowed past like schools of fish, weaving through light and shadow. Inside, our laughter competed with the hum of the city—a sound that never fully paused, only shifted.

But the moment that always returns to me is the rain. In Saigon, the rain never asks permission; it arrives like an ambush. One cloud, one breath, and suddenly the sky breaks open. Vendors fling tarps over their stalls in seconds, like they've rehearsed it all their lives. Motorbikes pull over in a synchronized

wave as riders tug on colorful ponchos. I remember the smell of wet concrete rising around me, thick and earthy, as raindrops drummed on the metal roofs. Streets became rivers reflecting neon signs, carrying leaves, bottle caps, and the hurried footsteps of strangers.

One afternoon, caught in a downpour near Bến Thành Market, my mother held my hand tightly as water swirled around our ankles. She laughed—really laughed—as we splashed across the street, her hair plastered to her forehead. Even at the time, part of me wanted to bottle that moment. I think that was the first time I understood how a city could be chaotic and tender at once.

Evenings softened everything. The sky dimmed into colors no camera could fully catch—burnt orange melting into violet, fading into the deep blue of approaching night. Lanterns glowed in temples tucked between apartment buildings, their reflections trembling in puddles left by the rain. Families gathered at plastic tables on the sidewalk, the clatter of chopsticks and metal spoons echoing through the alley. I stood at the balcony of my grandmother's apartment, watching the city slip into a different rhythm. The motorbikes glided past, their headlights streaking like fireflies in motion. Loud music from a karaoke bar spilled into the night, and somewhere nearby, a neighbor's rice cooker clicked open, releasing steam into the humid air.

For years, I didn't know how much these moments mattered. Saigon was simply the backdrop to my life—the noise, the motion, the heat, the smell of incense drifting from a pagoda, the sugarcane juice sticky on my fingers. It was only when I prepared to leave—packing clothes, hugging neighbors' goodbye, hearing the last call of a street vendor from my window—that the city sharpened into focus. Suddenly every sound was worth remembering. Every alley contained a memory. Every rainstorm felt like a farewell.

Now, living thousands of miles away, I find that Saigon still lives inside me in ways I never expected. Sometimes Athens feels too quiet, the streets too wide, the air too still. On those days, I close my eyes and listen. If I concentrate hard enough, I can hear the faint echo of scooters weaving past my grandmother's gate, smell the incense from a District 5 temple, taste the

subtle bitterness of Vietnamese drip coffee (cà phêphin) dripping slowly into a glass. Writing about Saigon is not just remembering—it is a way of returning.

I used to think home was a place you could leave behind, but Saigon refuses to stay in the past. It pulses in my chest when I miss my family, colors my dreams with the glow of lanterns after rain and shapes the way I see the world—with intensity, with tenderness, with a rhythm that asks you not just to observe life, but to feel it fully.

Saigon was the first place that taught me how to see, how to listen, how to belong. And even now, as I cross oceans and languages, part of me still walks those streets every day. The city moves with me—its chaos, its beauty, its heartbeat—all still written beneath my skin.

