

## ENGLISH: *CREATIVE WRITING*

Identity is shaped by positive and negative experiences.

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"Reconciliation"

I always wonder who I might have been if I had not come to Australia. I was only four, but I still remember the sea bulging and sinking beneath the hull of our boat, the rank smell of sweat laced with vomit slipping its evil fingers up my nose and into my mouth and lungs. There was only that smell and the heat of my mother's body as I nestled in her lap, her heart beat in my ear, an endless night in which I slept and waked, an endless bulging and sinking. I was Viet Nam – the jungles and swamps and rice paddies deeply etched in to my small, lively heart, my sharp hunger that of my people, my gaunt frame, theirs. Knowing only Viet Nam, I did not imagine the yellow sun or the food of the place to which we were headed – I thought of the soft cloudy ducks we'd left behind in a Saigon backyard.

"You so shy!" cried my mother. "Go play!" she hustled me out onto the dilapidated front veranda of our new home. "Go play footy. No more be mouse." I watched the flywire door swing shut, then sat on the front steps, picking at the cracked white paint, sun hot on my bent head. I had only caught a little of her broken English with my Viet Nam ears - 'shy', 'play', 'mouse'. The rest was a seamless babble, like the constant chatter of the hens out the back; meaningless. Language had plugged my ears and tied my hands, separating me from the kids screaming and racing about in the street below. I was as a prisoner in their midst, dumb, no words to defend myself from their pranks or to accept with thanks their friendship. Whereas in Saigon I had been known among my playmates parents as 'kitten', I was now only a mouse – too shy to join in, too shy to learn Australian ways.

School was worse. I was still very much Viet Nameese, not only in language and thinking but preferences. Used to the open streets and lush rice paddies outside Saigon, I was not confined to this complex of angular buildings. I remember being so overwhelmed that I did not see things until they were directly in front of me, seeing not a classroom or a group but a chair, a face, an expression. Nothing made sense. The worlds was crammed with shapes and faces – faces I could not distinguish, sounds I could not understand. Who could have guessed that this peaked little face with the wide eyes and parted lips had once had twinkling eyes, un upward turn to his mouth? Who could have dreamt that the reclusive mouse in Sydney had been a frolicsome kitten in Saigon?

Things improved. As I learnt the language, Viet Nam moved across to make room for Australia in my heart. I learnt to love the strong warmth of the Australian sun and the fragrance of new cut grass. I was introduced to the hot thick textures of a meat pie and the steam curling off a barbecued sausage. And as once again I became more involved with the world around me, I found myself changing. Struggles had made me reclusive, ease now reconciled me with society. In year seven I approached a quiet little girl with freckles on her pretty pale face and strawberry blond plaits. That Saturday I spent the money I'd earned cleaning out the chicken coop on movie tickets and caramel popcorn. Now Annie and I are both in year twelve and I'm still spending my money on movie tickets and caramel popcorn. I've learnt to love the language she speaks and the food she eats and the way she and other Aussies live. But Viet Nam has never quite edged out. I still love a heaped plate of snowy rice and fish. And sometimes, after cleaning that wretched chicken coop, I'll sit on the back veranda with my chin on my hands and my elbows on my knees and watch my ducks nosing about in the tussocks and near fences for snails and spiders, preening their thick, silky breast feathers, and I'll remember the limpid green rice paddies of my people, dotted with the yellow, wide-brimmed hats of the sowers.

Perhaps if I had not suffered the pain of being separated by shyness and language I'd be different – somewhat more outgoing, less serious – one of those self-confident, loud boys you see mucking around on the footy oval while classes are in progress. But I did – and because of it I met Annie,

because of it I'm a unique blend of cultures, full of the good things of both Viet Nam and Australia. My heart is not divided between two places, two places are in my heart.

### Written Explanation

I chose to respond to the prompt 'Identity is shaped by positive and negative experiences' in an imaginative response. At first I endeavoured to write in poetic form, because this medium is powerful because of its precision and the manner in which it draws heavily on the emotions through language and structure. After forty-five minutes of unrewarded effort I decided to convert the poem into short story form, while still retaining the imagery and emotional force of poetry. The protagonist describes himself 'as a prisoner', limited by ignorance of English in an English-speaking country, as well as 'a mouse' and 'a kitten' with metaphor and simile creating semantic links with the reader, thus involving the emotions. In the same way the protagonist uses imagery to recount his cultural ties, saying he 'was Viet Nam' and detailing how Viet Nam 'moved across to make room for Australia in my heart'. The spelling of Vietnam I have employed here is also an important feature of language as it recognizes that Vietnamese spell their country's name differently than Australians do. Use of the first person point of view also makes the piece more emotionally confronting, positioning the reader to sympathize with the protagonist and those like him according to my purpose.

My purpose was to write for a more reflective audience, those interested in the experiences of individuals within the big issues rather than exclusive focus on the issues themselves (such as multiculturalism) exploring how travelling to another country might affect one particularly regarding language barriers. To this end – relective focus on individual, not issue – I left the economic and social circumstances of the protagonist ambiguous. There is no real indication of whether the protagonist is refugee or immigrant so that the purpose of the text might be realized and sympathy established.

Because we are studying identity and belonging, I chose to write the story of a boy who loves a place, moves, and eventually comes to feel as though he belongs in both through a combination of good experiences and bad. While my piece is not recognizably linked, I drew my ideas from *Baked Beans and Burnt Toast* by Jacqui Soo, found in *Growing up Asian in Australia*. Its surprising twist at the end led me to explore the concept of belonging found through love of a culture rather than ethnic ties, which led indirectly to the reflection that dual belonging – especially one as positive as the protagonists – might be found in one who had travelled young as fewer of the more negative memories would be retained. As the protagonist recounts: 'My heart is not divided between places, two places are in my heart.'