A Letter to my Freshman Self
by Baoyun Chelsea Cheo ’17

1) Writing your capstone will be a journey. And it doesn’t end on March 31st. You’re going to go through a total of five iterations of your script and still not be happy with it. Even on submission day, it’s going to feel incomplete. And that’s perfectly okay! My pieces are never in their final stage and are changing to this very day. As I age, my writing matures and I’m closer each day to finding my style. It takes time, a whole lot of time to write your best work.

2) You’re not going to write your best work. Stop obsessing over whether your play is perfect. It’s never going to be. Your play will always be a living and breathing thing. Write a scene and leave it alone. Come in the next day and edit ruthlessly and heartlessly.

3) Revel in the collaborative nature of theatre. These people – the actors, the director, the production team, are your spring boards. Use them for their imagination, their creativity and pick their brains. The process is collaborative, listen to their interpretations, listen to what they think and how they feel about a certain line, it’s really insightful and gives another perspective to play with.

4) Don’t feel pressured to explain what my work is about. Is it about family? Is it about the struggle between tradition and modernity? A story about feminism? It’s a little bit of everything. It’s hard to pin it down because plays are dynamic and subjective. It will mean something different to different people. When your work is out there, all you can do is trust the public, trust the work to stand for herself and more importantly, trust yourself. Stay away from words with ‘-isms’, they tend to distance rather than pull closer.

5) Don’t freak out when you meet with a reviewer. Yes, he’s holding a pen and paper. Yes, he is ready to write down everything you say, even immortalize those dumb things that come out of your mouth into ink. But don’t freak out! More often than not, reviewers are here to support you, or at least they’re trying to understand you or your work. Help them a bit and keep to your key messages.

6) Last but not least, have fun! That’s the whole point of writing creatively anyway. And then also get a day job so you can support yourself. WC
On Experiments in Teaching: Form-Shifting Gertrude Stein

by Heidi Stalla

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition.

~ Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation”

Gertrude Stein’s “Composition as Explanation” was given as a lecture to both Cambridge and Oxford University students in 1926. I don’t know how it was received by that group, but I do know that ninety years later as a composition that I have used at Yale-NUS in both my Woolf class and a range of writing classes, it confuses, it shows, and I like it as it is, but even if students like it as it is, it’s hard sometimes for the group to know where to start when I ask what it means. I imagine, since nothing changes generation to generation, this was also true in 1926.

Except in 1926 the thing “seen” was different. It was in fact a thing “heard”, a lecture read aloud by an avant-garde art collector and experimental writer who was preoccupied like other modernists with new possibilities for language. In Stein’s case (who has had her work set to music by composers), startling arrangements of words create sonic patterns that can lend meaning to the writing. A few years ago, while I was still at NYU Abu Dhabi, as a pedagogical experiment, I asked artist and musician Diana Chester (teaching at Yale-NUS this year), to read Stein’s essay aloud and she was immediately taken with the rhythm of the piece. We decided that she would translate the work into a sonic composition, keeping as true to the form as possible—a process we had tried previously with other texts and dubbed “form-shifting.” In fact, I am currently working on an Independent Study with Adam Lau and Xiao Ting Teo as they “form-shift” Virginia Woolf’s work. I have found that inviting students to translate difficult passages in modernist literature to non-written mediums (music, painting, even dance) and paying meticulous attention to form and structure first and not interpretation, helps ultimately to deepen understanding of meaning. The process quite literally is (re)composition as a means of explanation.

Stein’s “Composition as Explanation” self-consciously embraces the “continuous present”; the essay effectively begins again and again, each time with new additions and variations, just like the thing “seen” at any particular moment in time. Stein stresses throughout that she is driven by “using everything”, giving us the sense that time—and history, which involves both composition of time and time of composition—is not only both fleeting and permanent at once, but also made up of finite constituents, like the fragmented colours of a child’s kaleidoscope falling into infinite arrangements with each generation. Chester focused on the elements described above as well as a fourth repeated line, “these are both things”, and worked on her own composition with four corresponding tracks. You can listen to her composition (and other examples of “form-shifting”) here: http://www.dianachester.com/music.html.

I took Chester’s composition with me the next time I assigned “Composition as Explanation” to students, and asked them to listen to the work as background music as they did some free-writing about two things: the meaning of Stein’s essay, and then when the music ended, their own definitions of the word “interpretation”. The form-shifted composition requires listeners to differentiate between the pieces and then to fall into the rhythm of the whole. Like Stein’s essay, the four tracks develop a language that speaks to the concepts of simultaneous constancy and change, repetition and difference, harmony and dissonance. I found when listening to some of the free-writing responses, students not only felt free to slip into Stein’s patterns and syntax, but were ultimately able to come to much richer and more intuitive understandings of the essay itself. And I loved the definitions of “interpretation.” Interpretation, one wrote, “is another thing that must be seen and in order to be seen it must be said that the saying that is a doing says it all. That is, seeing it and saying it are the same and not the same because the one completes and the other is a completion: interpretation is the completion that doesn’t complete.” The same, I feel, goes for composition: composition as conversation is never over. WC
ranter: Tokyo Love

by Carissa Foo

Too late, Tokyo

The first day in Tokyo my watch stopped. 19:40, but the firmament blue said otherwise. Dr Marten’s heavier, Kanken’s weighting down, and Levi’s a straitjacket. Yet, against gravity, we move, slowly. The bus engine low roaring. Out the window, numbers are legible and Chinese characters semi-recognisable. Only an hour in Japan and I am already hesitating; and my Casio, more than water-resistant, the Iphone, still on flight mode, they let me be.

In Tokyo I am tardy. More so this September than last December or twelve Augusts ago. I had planned three dinner dates, and I was late for all. I missed a train station; I left a shirt in the hotel. I’m not used to speed. When I was a kid I did not like Sonic the Hedgehog, neither did I fancy Speedy Gonzales. I wanted Coyote to gobble up Roadrunner. I wanted the Hare to trip over the Tortoise. The dislike for speed, I began to wonder whilst brisk walking to Ikebukuro Station every morning, must have something to do with my proclivity to hesitate. I crashed many cars in Daytona and my gas pedal’s stuck in Dirt Rally. My forte, if any, is shy pace. Even my reflex is slow, slower; my instinct is to want nothing of speed, not yet—not too soon.

Tardiness is the hesitant body’s response to a culture of efficiency. In a city where two clicks of a machine bring dinner, where Tachiguis make faster food than MacDonald’s, one is born to run. In rebellion, the foreign body slows down; stops. There is no rush hour. To others, it is spacing out. To itself, it is sovereign. Still, it is often a poorly fought fight, for the rules and dojo are theirs. And, in hesitating, the body has no first-move advantage.

I had assumed tardiness was a bizarre jet lag situation. Only later I found out that Japan is an hour ahead. Now I am very sure it is 9:31AM, SGT. WC

by Dini Parayitam

Confessions in Tokyo: rain has a romantic temperature as it falls on a lovesick mind. I imagine—this rain has touched what I long to touch; the stars have blinked at the eyes I long to see; the air has absorbed a scent I long to inhale; the birds echo the voice I long to hear. What I want to sense is the owner of a shadow that haunts me.

I am paraphrasing a fictional poem. ‘Why’ doesn’t have to matter.

The Madonna knows motherhood but can she write about eros? I hope there are some emotions one must experience; imagination cannot be relied upon or used as a substitute without consequences. To write about the real thing, you must have collected the real thing within yourself. Otherwise, what is written is collage of recycled images.

Even when we know the real thing, we too easily depend on vagueness to shield ourselves and our feelings from scrutiny and criticism.

Taylor Swift only writes her songs after a jilting. Within the duration of each song, she reclaims the throne upon which she had once placed a King for all of Swiftlandia, a prince plucked from a list of the most eligible James Deans. Repeatedly, she tries to apply the fairy tale and fails. In her lyrics, she shreds the man and their relationship but it is difficult to tell which she hates and regrets more. We scream “Stop writing about your exes, Taytay.”

‘What else is there to write about?’ she might say, ‘Kanye?’ She is a modern Medea.

Like Olivia Laing researches loneliness, I often google the fatality of lovesickness. I reread the WebMD page-discussion of it. I have none of the symptoms, only the vocabulary.

Lovesickness is not a medical affliction; it is a less literary term for longing.

Confessions in Singapore: I sat before a man and remained silent as a mosquito first bit his cheek and then, his forehead. I envied his numbness.
An Excerpt from “The Wedding Pig”

by Baoyun Chelsea Cheo ’17

DEBBIE throws a holiday magnet at her sister’s face, leaving a small cut on her cheek. The magnet breaks into two upon hitting the floor. Silence. DEBBIE crawls towards the broken magnet.

LEAH I have a wedding in a week.

DEBBIE tries to fix the broken magnet.

LEAH (She touches her graze) I don’t see what’s the big deal with all these magnets. Of all the things you chose to take, you take some lousy magnets. You don’t even have a fridge, so where are you going to stick them? Silence. Is it because it reminds you of a happier time? You know mom mostly brought us to these destinations because you loved the beach right and it’s not actually because we loved it. I can’t swim.

LEAH pushes the magnets with her feet into a bundle.

LEAH Are you not saying anything because it’s true? You can stop trying to fix it, it’s never going to be whole again, you know. (Pause) Fine.

LEAH steps on the bunch of magnets, putting her body weight on them, many of them break under pressure. DEBBIE reacts, pushes LEAH away, saving her magnets from being stepped on again.

DEBBIE What is your problem?!

LEAH I have a lot; One, my sister cut me. Two, my sister cut me a week before my wedding. Three, –

DEBBIE Are you afraid Zach’s not going to want to marry you after he finds out you’re ugly?

LEAH Come on –

DEBBIE Don’t be a little bitch. At least your ugly face grows back, these magnets won’t. And if you’re so excited to get married, then go. If that’s the only way you feel happy, then go. Get out of my house.

Silence.

LEAH You know, people outside, outside of our family, they aren’t going to tell you what they see. Cause it’s none of their business. But I, I can see and I don’t want other people outside telling me what’s wrong. But if you’re just going to act like this, then you’re just objectively, plainly, absolutely, a piece of shit. Because all, all I’ve been trying to do – is to be normal. Normal and a functioning human being. Because you’re just so damn negative to be around. It’s like you’re some kind of black orb that drags people down when they’re around you. You just suck up the energy in people’s lives. And drag everyone down with you into this dark hole. You know something – Zach doesn’t want to pay for our house debt anymore. He wants us to sell our pig. Where am I going to find…. You don’t even have a sofa, where do you sit? … I have a wedding, the bank called about clearing the bomb shelter. I forgot we had a bomb shelter. Did you know? I can’t decide whether I want vanilla cream or butterscotch cream on my wedding cake. I know you don’t care. And I’m not asking you to care. But all I’m saying is – I have things to do. And, I came for my little pig. I’m not saying you took it, but if you saw it – then I would like it back. It’s the one thing I want to complete. WC
We drift through the dreamland of Akihabara as observers, meandering through the streams of neon-haired, bright-eyed crowds and bathing in the streetlights. The cityscape looks as if it is lifted directly from the front of a postcard sent by that relative who's travelled all around the world, with just a hint of a suggestively placed anime girl billboard showing near the border. We inhabit those four borders, yet the imagination Akihabara provokes is ironically boundless. When I was younger I dreamt of entering paintings of fantasy worlds, of wizards and dragons and unabashed magic. Sometimes the details of the paintings felt so real that it seemed real. In Akihabara, the details of reality are surreal that it feels like fantasy.

In Akihabara, anime characters come to life, deep desires see the light of day, extreme fantasies push the envelope, desires of innocence and sexuality. The womanhood; skilled in morphing twin from pre-pubescence to the peak of her body voluptuous with every curve shaded so that they seem almost tangible. Japanese illustrators are indubitably versed in the study of bodies, from pre-pubescence to the peak of womanhood; skilled in morphing twin desires of innocence and sexuality. The repressed desires of us consumers, the same people who reside in conservative societies, who would Blanch at the sight of too much skin, are deftly brought into the fluorescent fantasy world of Akihabara - where the body transcends the physical into limitless imagination.

The Tokyo outside of Akihabara is grace and restraint tucked into the kimono of a server in a Sado ceremony; it is the deliberate swing of a shinai in kendo. The contrast jolts us out of the frenzy of our neon-coloured dream. Yet as much as Akihabara feels like a dream, it is not the kind of dream you instantaneously forget when you wake up. We see reminders everywhere. The doe-eyed, innocent anime girl is transposed to the everyday Japanese woman who adorns blush, natural-toned makeup and totes doll-like bangs, who speaks in susurrated tones and makes demure, poised gestures. She is the sweet, natural beauty in the blossom of her youth, the character who has ambled her way out of an anime into the streets of Tokyo, and one that both the Japanese men and women admire. We find ways to extend the fantasy, to exemplify the ideals in our lives. And as far as bringing fantasy into reality goes, only the body is the limit. WC

What Mathematics Taught me about the Writer’s Block
by Peer Tutor Jolene Lum

Endeavors in mathematics have a penchant for creating periods of being stuck. The feeling of having to deal with a complex problem is often frustrating, and when it feels like you don’t have enough tools to even begin approaching a solution might be more than intimidating. Even after learning to be calm in the face of unfamiliar problems, to consider what we know already and what we could derive, the feeling of being stuck does not go away. Each time, I am reminded of what being unable to write feels like- scribbles on a page and not much to help explain how it all comes together to glean a larger conclusion.

When running out of time on a problem set, however, yields no choice other than trying to move on- and perhaps what’s intuitive in mathematics is to start afresh on a new proof or solution. I’ve learnt from many fond professors and classmates in mathematics, being stuck with the same approach for more than a few hours would not get me anywhere- and I’d be better off trying to weave a proof from different definitions and perhaps a different approach altogether. And often, this helps tremendously, albeit still requiring great amounts of time to reconsider the problem. In fact, it doesn’t just help me solve a problem, but brings immense satisfaction from how I’ve expanded regiments of thinking about concepts, and looking at the problem from different perspectives has allowed for a refreshing bird’s eye view of what I have learnt from solving it.

It occurs to me that it might have been a lot more difficult for me (or anybody) to rip apart an essay draft of hundreds of words instead of starting a math problem over again on a fresh sheet of paper. The times I did allow the instinct to reconsider my argument and approach altogether, I liked my essays better- and I enjoyed writing them a lot more. I re-arranged what I had on my hands to work with, tried re-defining the clear end goal of why I was writing, and refused to sit with my block for too long. The writing process demands we ask the questions we’re trying to answer as well, and it seems more than alright to start over and try again, both when writing mathematics or anything else. WC
Bunker

by Myle Yan Tay

It had been 19 days since he had last seen the sun. And it would be many more before he would see it again. Jackson Figgins wandered through his vault, sweeping up the dust. It was an air-tight bunker yet somehow still dust collected. This speck of dust will outlive us all, he thought to himself. He swept off his bowling trophy, checked his reflection in the golden ball that sat atop it. His facial hair was coming along… slowly. He had hoped that by now he would have a full beard, rough and rugged, so he could impress the survivors upon his exit. Jackson could still see the scars from his virginal acne. He checked the clock. It was 1905hrs up there.

The vault was cozy. Most of the floor was covered in a vintage Persian carpet. Jackson didn't like the way it felt on his feet. He wore his combat boots, so his bare soles never touched the fabric. The massive beanbags were too vibrant for Jackson. Neon Green and Hot Pink. If the vault wasn't sealed, he could have broken out his camo spray paint, and get this bunker combat ready. He added it to his mental checklist of “Things to Do Better Next Time”. The vault was broken up into five rooms: a bedroom, a kitchen, a toilet, a meditation room and a darts room. Jackson had converted the darts room into a war room. He covered the billiards table with a map of the city, with food sources circled and gun stores starred.

The walls were mostly bare, with a single T-shirt pinned to the wall of the darts room. ‘Ramones, 1976, Toronto, Canada’. It had been put up by the previous tenant. There was a record player in the bedroom, but mostly music from the swingin’ 60’s. Jackson stuck to his iPod Classic, 18 gigabytes of alternative, punk, rock, metal, angry music. On the fourth day, he realized he had not packed the charger. He had brought the wire, but no plug. “Things to Do Better Next Time”. He remembered doing a science project when he was six, powering a light-bulb with a potato. He hadn't packed any potatoes though, they weren’t an efficient enough food source. So he cut an avocado in half, pulled out the pit, and plugged the wire in. He used the other half to make guacamole. He was unsurprised when the iPod didn't charge. It was alright though, Jackson had been forming a memory palace of his iTunes library. He would be able to recall any song he wanted, by stepping into his mind, taking two lefts, then a right, and find himself in the ballroom with Eddie Vedder, strumming and tapping his acoustic guitar, glass chandelier swinging from the ceiling, in tempo.

Jackson’s favourite bands were once Blink 182 and Sum 41. In middle school, he would say his favourite band was Blum 223. The joke never landed because nobody was listening to “Untitled” or “All the Small Things” anymore. They had all moved onto bigger grander things like “Levels (original Avicii mix)” or titles with a $ instead of an S. When his friends swapped from all-black crew cuts to saturated bright v-necks, Jackson gave their music a try. It was all beat, no substance, none of the visceral attitude Jackson was used to. He could not abide by their taste and stuck to his own earphones. It was not enough to remove himself from the group. He had to rebel. So while they went forward, he went backward. For a week, Jackson frantically flipped through the collection at the last CD store in town. Album after album, his ears began to turn red with aching, his head compressed between hard leather ear pads, all manner of drums, guitars, strings, voices blasting through his skull. Until he found it. A naked baby swimming for a dollar. Nevermind. Nirvana. WC

The Sun on his Face

by Jonathan Yip

The tourist speaks -
Tame self to the wild,
A force of relief:

He who lives by the branch,
Who clambers atop windscreens, rooftops.
This curious captive, a child of subsistence.

He finds the Sun perched on my nose.
Begotten from fondness, a pounding rage;
A keen attraction to base desire.

In a single bound, this mountain man
Had leapt across the ocean’s width,
His eager test - to touch the face of God. WC

A White Man in Guangzhou

by Madi Lommen

There’s a white man in Guangzhou.
But he is not clad in knickers and tweed
Like the usuals who frequent this Little Italy between planes.

Surely they staffed him for words intelligible
To those who know not the ancient stroke.
Who else would pick pepperoni over dumplings anyway?

Still his words, tinged with respite
When he serves sweet cunning on a platter made for cheese
To the knickers and tweed across the counter.

His smile, dashed like salt and pepper,
With each shake from an over-zealous wrist.
What brings him to this terminal, day after day?

Much as the ear strains, it detects no dialect
In his focaccia banter,
In his Guangzhou stay,
In his white-man way.

Does he share the tongue of the white hats moving about him?
After all, he does stands taller than they,
Like his paper crown beside their forehead stubble.

I guess they weren’t so wrong to ask if Asians could think
When history reveals itself even
In the focaccia banter of a white man in Guangzhou. WC
Fish Hook

by Ryan Foo

When is that we hit the point of no return, where we sink our own battleships to prevent further holes in pendulous bellies -- pull it in: increasing returns lead to the composition of hollower hulls to ring out bubbling with froth and anger as we dive down further. I thought we would repair these holes, but once those words have been uttered, once those ideas have poured forth like bile into a sewer, you cannot merely cut the cord and return as you were. You, you've fished before -- lowered your razor tooth jaw into murky waters hoping for some returns to your venture, a dollar sunk into the cost of a hook or two as you catch fire for hurting what does not belong to you. The Barb that bristles hums another port of last call; it reminds you that even the Barbed wire fences. Embalmed hearts with our barbed wire fences.

From The Nightstand
of Detmer Kremer

Deepa Iyer – We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape our Multiracial Future (The New Press): In this incredibly accessible and topical book, Iyer complicates how many aspects of identity are understood in the United States. By focusing on the experiences of South Asian, Muslim, and Sikh immigrants and refugees she complicates current debates surrounding police brutality, freedom of religion, and undocumented migrants. The racialization she discusses of South Asian Americans illuminates the ever-shifting nature of categories of race in the United States and how these categories impact the lived experiences of millions of people. Ultimately, she ends her powerful insight on cultural change in the States with a call for solidarity amongst all marginalized peoples and their allies to create a new type of nation truly welcoming to all.

Han Kang – Human Acts (Hogarth): A stunning tale that weaves together the perspectives of those alive and dead. Kang shares histories that challenge our understanding of how events unfold – in this case specifically the student uprisings in Gwangju, South Korea during the 80s. She does not just inform, but rather show the directions of the lives and deaths of all participants in these protests. The power lies in how Kang humanises an event, and maps out the reverberations that ripple through the lives of many. The transgressions between the borders of powerful and powerless, wise and naive, and living and dead implore a more empathetic approach to the historic narratives we do or do not tell.

Colson Whitehead – The Underground Railroad (Doubleday): This tale of an enslaved woman escaping the harrowing reality of a plantation in the American South introduces a touch of magical realism that is often absent in tales of historical oppression. In this imagined narrative of real oppression, the Underground Railroad is an actual railroad through which the protagonist physically and experientially travels through the United States and its manifestations of the dehumanization of black people, and black women in particular. However Whitehead’s novel does not become a tale in which the protagonist is a mere recipient of violence, but rather the story captures how alongside survival there is space for dreaming and realizing alternative futures that bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice.
A Community of Writers: Collaboration across the Liberal Arts

*a Writers’ Centre Symposium*

**Wednesday, November 8**
6:00pm to 7:30pm Opening Event: Authors in the Open Air, A Reading - Location: Amphitheatre (rain location: Tan Chin Tuan Lecture Theatre)

**Thursday, November 9**
10:30am to 12:00pm Panel: Figures, Sums, Diagrams: How Writing Makes Sense of Science - Location: Classroom 15

1:00pm to 2:15pm Panel: An Unlikely Marriage: Creative Writing and Academic Writing - Location: Classroom 15

3:30pm to 4:00pm Panel: Finger Pointing and the Writing Conundrum: Whose responsibility is it to teach students to write? - Location: Classroom 15

4:00 to 5:00pm Reception - Location: Tan Chin Tuan Lecture Theatre

5:00 to 6:30pm Keynote Speaker: Thomas Bartscherer; Peter Sourian
Senior Lecturer in the Humanities and former Director of the Language and Thinking Program at Bard College - Location: Tan Chin Tuan Lecture Theatre

**Friday, November 10**
10:30am to 12:00pm Panel: Writing Across the Curriculum: What is it and how does it work - Location: Saga Lecture Theatre

12:30pm to 2:00pm Faculty Workshop: To begin to think to write again: a workshop on liberal education and writing - Location: Tan Chin Tuan Lecture Theatre

2:30pm to 4:00pm Panel: Experiential Learning and the Writing Process: Curricular, Co-curricular and Extra-curricular - Location: Saga Lecture Theatre

Details at writerscentre.yale-nus.edu.sg/events

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Consultation FAQs

1. **Who can come to the Writers’ Centre for a consultation?**
   You! Writers’ Centre consultations are open to all students, staff, and faculty.

2. **When should I come for a Writers’ Centre consultation?**
   As soon as possible. The Writers’ Centre is open from 10am to 6pm from Monday to Friday. You can schedule up to 14 days in advance.

3. **Who will I be meeting with?**
   You choose! Consultants include writing lecturers, peer tutors and Writers’ Centre staff members. You can read their profiles on the Writers’ Centre website.

4. **Can the Writers’ Centre help me with science papers?**
   Writers’ Centre consultants can help with any kind of paper. Some science faculty require students to come for consultations!

5. **I just got a prompt, how do I begin?**
   The Writers’ Centre is a great place to start brainstorming. Consultants have tricks to help you get to the heart of the prompt’s question and tips for ways to connect your texts with your ideas.

6. **As a senior I’ve written many papers. Do I really need help with my capstone?**
   The capstone can be a huge endeavour. We work with you to break it into smaller pieces and help with each step.

7. **Sounds great! How do I make an appointment?**
   Go to the Writers’ Centre website and click on the “Book an Appointment” tab.