Consider your heartbeat for a long moment. How many times a day do you hear it drum within its chambers? Save for the moment your voice is called before a crowd or she walks into the room, the answer is likely rarely. Rarely do we appreciate the space within that hosts a world of emotion. In his essay, “Joyas Voladoras”, Brian Doyle describes the complexity of our inner world within the heart. He details the heart as inexorably responsive despite “how many bricks you bring to the wall”—that is, regardless of the many ways we seek to shut some out and keep others in (Doyle 2004). Our bricks are both prejudice and protection. The heart in “Joyas Voladoras” however, serves as more than mere metaphor; it insinuates a certain rhythmic quality imbedded throughout the essay. It is this rhythm that breathes life into the essay and gives the prose a heartbeat of its own. And rightfully so—certainly we would struggle to discern the intended message about a heart from an essay that didn’t thump even a little. This fusion of form and content is precisely what determines the success of “Joyas Valodoras”, so much so that we are prompted to consider how a similar aesthetic beauty might be translated to the academic standard. Surely, the infamous five-paragraph essay is a disgrace to its discipline! It is from this idea that we return to the Doylian metaphor of the heart as a physical space: if content makes bricks and form makes mortar, then only in reconciling the two will we build a solid essay. When we extend the metaphor of a city to the essay, we fell city walls, we break the rules. This is just what we ought to do: siege the city and save the essay. It does not matter where we place the bricks—that is, how far we extend our reach within or outside of accepted standards—so long as the author and the reader collaborate to determine our city borders. When we collaborate in this way, we do something even more significant: we fell the walls of our hearts as well. Our personal bricks topple to reveal our vulnerability in heaps. Writing is vulnerable. Writing exposes our character in its beauty and flaws alike by the mere form we record experiences even when those experiences themselves conceal our identity. This vulnerability breathes life into our essays so that they must beat the rhythm of our own heart. The task that remains then is to find another heartbeat in the exposé of ourselves and write anew our collective brick-by-brick. WC
A Night of Love Letters
by Laurel Flores Fantauzzo

At the end of January, the Writers’ Centre hosted a small book launch party for an anthology I co-edited with Dr. Francesca Rendle-Short. PRESS: 100 LOVE LETTERS (University of the Philippines Press) gathered correspondence by women to women across the Asia-Pacific region. Four writers joined us, reading the poems, short letters, and recollections they had contributed to the collection: Vaishnavi Nathan, Karla Singson, kyt, and Charlene Shepherdson. Lecturer and teacher of a YNC course on love letters, Dr. Carissa Foo, read the epistolary introduction I co-wrote with Dr. Rendle-Short. Here’s a short excerpt:

Remember we wanted this book to be a letter of love about who we are, how we are in this world, and why we matter, how and what and why we taste the way we do? Whether you are a woman who loves another woman, a woman who loves a trans person, or someone who has loved in a manner too delicious for any language’s pronouns.

Yes. You and I wanted to see: What happens when women write to each other, for each other? What if we asked gentlemen to put their pens and guitars down, and let women and genderfluid lovers play and write and give song?

We ended the night with a lively Q&A session with the contributors. Traditional kuih kapit-- love letter cookies—was a sweet accompaniment to our usual wine and cheese. And our program manager Jenika Kaul set up a love letter writing station, where visitors could draft love letters of their own. WC

Lessons on Loss
By See Wern Hao ‘20

Her head lay between my thighs. I studied her eyes, glimpsing the tower blocks rising past the whites, the clear sky, night shimmering through the window.

When I was nine, my father bought me a terrapin. I filled a tank, washed cabbages and plucked them like rose petals, scattering them. It gnawed on the pale green leaves with half-formed teeth. When I poked its head, it shrank beneath its shell, each ridge dividing sunlight. Then, its eyelids started to swell, drooping. It perched on the lonely plastic island, divine, blinking, blinking. The leaves became detritus, seeping green into the still water.

I thought as long as I fed her, there would be hope. Every Thursday, when she was out for class, I hung a small plastic bag of cookies and miscellaneous diabetes-inducing snacks at her door with a note each time. On the week when I ran out of words, I folded a crane which perched on the door handle for a while, before falling, barely a shuffle as it struck the ground.

I poured the vitamin-rich pellets into the water. It watched them float by, dissolving. It tried to swallow one but its teeth had long softened. It bit on the pellet, shaking its head vigorously. The water turned murky, my eyes, blurring.

I’m sorry I do not know how to fix this.

Its skin started drying out from staying on the plastic rock for too long. Gangrene stripes crept up its body, still. Once every half hour or so, it would twitch its flippers, as if paddling towards a shore beyond

The solid plastic sky which my forehead pressed against, dislodged by the acceleration of the bus pulling up to the stop right outside the hostel. The reel of trees slowed and I looked away from her, squeezing my shoulders, stiff. Two singular beeps from the card reader, we stepped out into the still air, tinged with cigarette smoke. I blinked, and blinked again.

I’m just having a sensitive reaction, that’s all. WC
Introducing New Faces at the Writers’ Centre

Please come and welcome the new members of our team: Judith Huang, our new part-time tutor, and the students who are our new peer writing tutors. We asked them some questions to help you get to know them better! Sign up for a consultation with them at http://yalenus.mywconline.com!

Judith Huang

Recent piece of writing that I enjoyed
The graphic novel Fun Home by Alison Bechdale

Favorite place to write
My favourite cafes, including Carpenter and Cook near my place

#1 Writing Tip
Especially for academic writing, just get started! You can always pretend you’re going to throw your first draft away. It usually turns out better than you think!

Most embarrassing writing moment
When I won a prize for a love poem I wrote and it wasn’t about my then boyfriend. He was so miserable trying to figure out who it was about for months after!

Adam Goh

Greatest challenge when it comes to writing
Trying to incorporate feedback while keeping my own voice

#1 Writing Tip
“Write drunk, edit sober,” a writing tip often wrongly attributed to Ernest Hemingway, is terrible advice; don’t do it.

Madi Lommen

Favorite part of the writing process
Brainstorming when brainstorming becomes so intense it turns to thunder on the keyboard.

Favorite Yale-NUS writing assignment to date
From Writing Pedagogy and Practice: Write a letter to the author that introduces your own idea of his or her text and then take that idea and turn it into an essay.

Recent piece of writing that I enjoyed
Notes of Native Son by James Baldwin

Favorite part of the writing process (and greatest challenge when it comes to writing)
Sitting with the uneasiness of not knowing how you want to say what you want to say.

Favorite place to write
On campus: UTown Infinity Pool or the area outside Starbucks. Off campus: by the water.

Megan Chua

Favorite Yale-NUS writing assignment to date
It would have to be my final paper for a class on literary activism I took last semester, where I wrote about extraordinary men and religious salvation. These questions were important: work became a means for self-recognition and self-expression.

Greatest challenge when it comes to writing
Trying to say something I think is important.

Jan-Michal Ong

Favorite place to write
I like to wander and write- a habit I picked up from Prof Stalla’s Travel Writing course-- so I often just take the bus, get off anywhere, and write at will.

Ritika Biswas

Favorite Yale-NUS writing assignment to date
I had a fantastic prompt for a class on Ekphrasis-- to respond to three film/art pieces which evoked childhood memories.
A section about the pocket revelations one gets when in a car—be it Uber, Grab, taxis, your own ride, your mum's ride; even more loosely speaking, a wheeled mobility device that gets you from one place to another. Does not count when you're in shoes, though the thought would be considered if you have a pair of skates on. There's something about speed, one not reliant on human strength, that affords the mind the peace of travelling slower.

Last December I took a road trip along the north-eastern coastline of England. With hindsight, it's neither a grand idea to be driving in the snow, nor spending time by the sea with winds strong enough to throw off a child's welling-ton. There was a lot of driving, a lot of time spent in the car—a semi-auto Toyota Aygo, a tad smaller than the Picanto with which I'm more acquainted—enough time to reflect on the reasons for driving in winter, though there is something about the icy cold that numbs the brain and chucks reason out the door.

Some car thoughts from the drive to Scarborough:
1) It's quicker by rail so I rented a car and drove at forty miles per hour on the motorway to avoid sheep.
2) According to Frost, there is a road taken and the road less travelled. There is the road I have been driving on, a winding single carriage way up a blind summit and down into another hilly terrain. Driving brings me through many desired paths. Maybe I'll find one that suits me if I drive long enough and around in circles. After all, England does have many roundabouts. Did you know Swindon has a magic roundabout with five mini-roundabouts within?
3) Because one dares not to look into the eyes of strangers, one either takes the backseat or acquires the habit of sitting beside. WC
I saw his wrinkled face first
No, it wasn’t as pale as the moon
As many poets refer their grandpar-
ents’ faces to
But, he looked old. Tired. It was 4 am
in the night after all.
He needn’t have come here. But he
did. Old as he was.

He took me to grandma
Her face was pale as the moon
Heart surgeries and property feuds
Had definitely taken the toll on her
She opened a tiffin box
There were four puris and curry

I’m eight years old now
The airport was quieter
We were heading back to Oman
My grandparents accompanied us
They were here to see my, sorry
their, sorry, our family off.
I see myself not being too concerned
about them
They were my Dad’s parents but.. so
what?

I’m thirteen years old now
A new terminal was under construc-
tion

I, my sib, and my parents were head-
ing back to Oman
I was old enough to feel the tension
in the air
As my mom parted with them
Mental scars caused by dowry seek-
ing mother-in-laws don’t fade
I was glad to be no longer in the
midst of all this

Seventeen. Adulthood on the verge
of germination.
The new terminal looked amazing in
my vision
My old grandparents were brushed to
the side
My head was in the clouds.
My pride didn’t have time for them
Those old people living in Kerala
The place that my fake-Indian heart
didn’t even call home

When eight, I was too young.
When thirteen, I was a young, naive
prick.
When seventeen, I was a young, na-
ive, arrogant prick.
Though it’s not entirely my fault that
I couldn’t see it
That they loved me. I barely visited

A Diasporic Wish
by Siddarth Praveen ‘21

During my trip to Copenhagen in 2016, I chanced upon the Muse-
um of Broken Relationships. I saw displays of mementoes signifying
failed relationships. The curated narrative was one highlighting
the shortcomings of our human efforts at love. Pessimism seeped
into my heart, because if this was what love looked like, then my
future could only speak of heartbreak and sadness. Yet, these items
encapsulated genuine and visceral experiences of love belonging
to everyday people like you and me. If love was a bed of roses, an
abundance of thorns was waiting to be found.
Hence, the idea of “Loved” popped into my head and settled its nest
in my mind. This name was chosen because

As a verb, Loved is a past tense. A signifier of forsaken treasures;
faded memories and forlorn regrets.
Yet, as an adjective, Loved is an adjective. A descriptor of present
joy, commitment and selflessness.
The ambivalence of this word now breaks the once-delineated
boundaries of our understanding of love, forcing us to navigate the
muddy waters of what “being loved” truly means.
As the project silently ended, I realised to try and explain love is to
try and explain the taste of durian. One simply has to try and expe-
rience it. WC
Dear Larry, All the cool kids are experimenting with form. Most of the time their work reads like rubbish but I wonder if some of them are ahead of their time. Am I a fool to stick with conventional form? But it's Borges for god's sake! Or Dostoevsky! Or Hemingway! What do I do, my dear Bragi?

Yours, An aspiring artiste

Ah tradition! Ah rebellion! I have to admit that my impulses lie on the side of the canon: not that I'm a firm believer in preserving the tried and the tested, but maybe there's a part of me that believes the best rebels are those that used to be part of the troop. A rock thrown against the edifice of the certain is dramatic, but then I've always wondered about the radical change that can happen from within—the slow work of termites across years, until a wooden fortress falls, the deep rust of gates.

So maybe it's less about choosing one over the other: between the dank breath of the dead and that awkward flailing of the new.

Perhaps when the work of the cool kids seem like rubbish, it's because they are really tantrums done without any due cause. And maybe it is in your continuing devotion to the canon, in gnarled arms of its embrace, where perhaps already beginning, a quiet distaste may grow, in the mouth, in the heart, that may one day incite to sing a song that runs counter to its tune, and you will gnash your teeth and you may choose to bite its hand, fiercely and out of love.

In this way will you leave your mark.

——

What is the role of academia in the world? How can it solve crises? Can it solve crises? Should it? People are starving—what are we supposed to do? Should we feel inclined to do something? What does it mean to walk the ground? Is climate resilience a marketing gimmick? How does one keep writing? Must I follow Rilke's advice? What does it mean to write or theorize from the South? Will consultancies die? Must one be an Economics major to get a job? Is capitalism the way to go? Are elitist college kids the new form of bourgeois claiming they're against the bourgeoisie? Should we care about politics? Is politics everywhere? Is this political? If so, if not, so what? What is apathy? How fast is history's pace? Does it matter? What is solid but liquid and gas at another time? How are all things made?

History's pace is slow and it matters. Capitalism comes and goes and comes again—especially in the South, where it takes time to think, and money. To walk the ground is to put one foot in front of another. Like you didn't care. But not like apathy. Which is stepping on someone else's foot. I'm not sure I get what advice of Rilke you are pertaining to, but he did suggest that solitude was best for creating and even (and especially) for love. But then he also said, that the only reason that one must write is if one needed to in order to love, and even some days I think this is too dramatic.

Climate resilience is real. The world will be much less of its beautiful self without academia. Is this not political, don't you think so?

———

Dear Larry, Agree or disagree: Yale-NUS is a toxic, claustrophobic environment. And why?

Some days, some embraces can be tighter than others. Are you roommates with the one who sent the previous letter?

———

Dear Larry, I'm a senior and I think I have senioritis. Which is to say that I find it difficult to be enthusiastic about my capstone or about much of my other classes because I am overwhelmed and tired by everything else that's going on. How do I rediscover my excitement for learning?

- Unenthusiastic Senior

There is a bus, I hear, called the 33, where you can whisper all your worries into one of its seats and they will disappear. There is a tree on campus, one of the ones near Dover, where you tap it once for all things you used to be enthusiastic about but not anymore, and twice, for everything else. I know all the rage these days is about being in the present moment, but sometimes the present moment sucks. That's when both nostalgia and prophecy come with the force of the future and the past to save us from the interminable clutches of the present. Remember the first class you had at Yale-NUS which sent your heart a-skipping. Think about what it will feel like to leave this place on graduation day. Press your palm against your heart. You'll be fine.

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Dear Larry, his shower gel finally ran out. should i get the same one? // what is morning where you are? //

He can get his shower gel for himself. Morning is where I write. WC
La Belle Sauvage by Philip Pullman (David Fickling Books): This new installment to Pullman's His Dark Materials universe is the first of a new prequel trilogy featuring a young boy named Malcolm. It is a tremendous pleasure to be back in the world of daemons and alethiometers, and in the company of well-drawn characters like the dashing Lord Asriel and the sophisticated Mrs Coulter. This time, young Malcolm, an inn-keeper's son, is tasked with keeping baby Lyra (our protagonist from the His Dark Materials trilogy) safe in the face of conspiracy, creeping religious fascism and danger. Although perhaps not quite reaching the heights of its predecessors, this was an absorbing read, and Malcolm, with his resourcefulness and intelligence, is a great new character.

Oranges are Not the Only Fruit by Jeanette Winterson (Vintage): I finally got around to reading this modern classic autobiographical novel. Winterson's tightly crafted novel tells of her childhood in a religious fundamentalist household, and the tension that caused with coming of age as a lesbian. Weaving myth, fairy tales, reality and fiction, this innovative novel takes us through the rollercoaster of emotions that come from leaving one's faith and home. I also found the introduction in this edition particularly interesting as Winterson describes the evolving reception of her book (from being misclassified as a cookbook to the gay/lesbian section to finally being recognized as literature). I absolutely loved Winterson's style – she is a true prose stylist.

The Gatekeeper by Nuraliah Norasid (Epigram Books): This novel is set in a Singapore thousands of years in the future, and features humanoid species with animal characteristics living alongside the dominant humans. Its protagonist is Ria, a female medusa who lives in an underground, marginalized community unknown to surface-dwellers, until her love interest Eedric finds her. Marginalized due to her poverty and dangerous ability to turn people into stone, Ria is nevertheless a repository of history and authenticity to the privileged Eedric. I thoroughly enjoyed reading about the complex dynamic and sibling rivalry between Ria and her more-beautiful sister, and though the novel does sag a little in the middle, the writing style is lovely and the characters vivid.

Writing as Lens
In Conversation with Inaugural Dean of Faculty Professor Charles Bailyn
by Peer Tutor Jolene Lum ’19

For a recent internship at the Asian Scientist Magazine, I was tasked to write an editorial piece on how curiosity is vital to the process of science and discovery, and how Singapore grapples with that. It naturally occurred to me to write to Professor Charles Bailyn, our inaugural Dean of Faculty, who provided me with an interview reflecting on our liberal arts identity. I was especially humbled by how Professor Bailyn spoke about the breadth of writing we have to do. Thinking critically in an age like ours, central to Yale-NUS students, returns itself to how all this writing and communication acts as a lens in making sense of the different strands in our liberal arts experience.

What Professor Bailyn shared with me regarding the challenges of educating good scientists (and thinkers in general) traces back to the very inception of our college: “Singapore has an extraordinarily successful secondary education system. Students emerge from their A-levels with technical knowledge unmatched in the world. But there is something lacking, and it is precisely to supply this lack that Yale-NUS was invented. What is lacking are communication skills, lateral thinking, organizational strategies, and independence of mind.”

Familiar buzzwords like ‘communication skills’ and ‘lateral skills’ are key objectives of our seminars across disciplines, and key to how we’ve come to understand college life. According to Professor Bailyn, the key to the synthesis of perspectives of different disciplines seem to return to writing as a lens to merge ideas.

“It] strikes me that MIT has done particularly well in recent years. They of course have a very rigorous standard science curriculum that their students - some of the best in the world - struggle to surmount. But they also have significant breadth requirements- in writing and the humanities- that are taken quite seriously. They are transplanting some of the new approaches in engineering education to SUTD, which I regard as a kind of companion effort to Yale-NUS. If these two institutions live up to their promise, Singapore will really have a very powerful system which I’m sure will bear fruit in all kinds of exciting scientific and technical innovation.”

From The Nightstand
of Judith Huang

La Belle Sauvage by Philip Pullman (David Fickling Books): This new installment to Pullman's His Dark Materials universe is the first of a new prequel trilogy featuring a young boy named Malcolm. It is a tremendous pleasure to be back in the world of daemons and alethiometers, and in the company of well-drawn characters like the dashing Lord Asriel and the sophisticated Mrs Coulter. This time, young Malcolm, an inn-keeper's son, is tasked with keeping baby Lyra (our protagonist from the His Dark Materials trilogy) safe in the face of conspiracy, creeping religious fascism and danger. Although perhaps not quite reaching the heights of its predecessors, this was an absorbing read, and Malcolm, with his resourcefulness and intelligence, is a great new character.

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An Excerpt from “Veganism: How Socioeconomic Forces Shape Normative Eating Behaviors”  
By Zhiying (Vivien) Su ’21

The following is an excerpt from Zhiying (Vivien) Su ’21’s essay about veganism, which won the inaugural Academic Essay Writers’ Centre contest. Professor Risa Toha nominated it because “I loved her paper because it was very clearly written and well-researched. Her ability to articulate a question and execute a design that answers this question is unusual amongst her peers.”

Kathryn Asher and Che Green’s survey (2014) revealed that more than fifty percent of vegans and vegetarians cited health, taste preferences, animal protection, or environmental concerns as reasons for their dietary decisions. To add, food photographer Maria Siriano confesses, “the hardest part of going vegan hasn’t been cravings, which are surprisingly few…, for me, the social ramifications of going vegan were far more discouraging” (Siriano 2017). Asher and Green’s study along with Siriano’s comment underline an important fact: on a micro-level of analysis, the individual does exercise some level of personal agency in their decision to become vegan. Cutting out animal products for personal and altruistic reasons requires tangible sacrifice and independent action, especially when meat consumption is the norm. In line with the previous analysis of socioeconomic forces, individuals of lower SES groups exercise even more personal agency when they decide to become vegan, as meat consumption is a greater descriptive norm within their social class. In this sense, individuals do possess personal agency and exert pressure to their social milieu in their dietary decisions.

On the macro-level of analysis, however, individuals are still part of a greater system of socioeconomic controls, and their decision to become vegan does not remove them from this system. The reality is that the main demographic group of vegans and vegetarians in the United States are “middle-class and upper-class individuals” (Lindquist 2013). Asher and Green’s survey (2014) also displayed an obvious positive relationship between education level and identification as vegan or vegetarian. Essentially, when an individual from a higher SES group makes the decision to become vegan, there exists an illusion of personal agency, because, in fact, the individual is acting within the boundaries of their socioeconomic reality. The implications of these studies are similar for individuals from a lower SES group, who are also constrained by their social class when they make decisions about their diet. Rather than an illusion of personal agency, however, their location in the class system yields norms that discourage them as a whole from choosing plant-based diets.

Moving beyond the scope of socioeconomic forces, the fact that veganism is now trendy also contributes to the idea that individuals’ decision to become vegan is the result of greater social forces. Asher and Green (2014) found that 63 percent of former vegan and vegetarian subjects disliked the fact that their diet made them “stick out from the crowd” (10). Although this observation explains why former vegan and vegetarians opted out of their lifestyle, it supports the overarching argument that individuals’ eating habits are heavily shaped by their social context.