One of the featured poets in our reading series this year is the exciting experimental poet Divya Victor. Having spent her childhood in India and Singapore, before subsequently moving to the United States, Victor's work explores concerns of cultural identity. Her work experiments widely with organic forms and takes its inspiration from diverse sources such as instruction manuals, immigration cards and thesaurus entries. As part of the Forms of Poetry class last year, I had the pleasure of interviewing Divya Victor regarding her work. Here are excerpts from that interview.

EL: Why do you write about cultural identity?
DV: I see the poet as a documentarian, a historical records keeper. Particularly with minimized identities, identities whose histories are typically represented by non-minorized identities, there seems to be a vacuum that needs to be intervened into. People can have multiple records, conflicting contrasting records about it, given a culture or subculture, or whatever that might be.

EL: Do you see writing as a mostly “selfish” endeavour?
DV: No, but it’s not necessarily a bad thing. Writing can be good for self-care and meditation, but that’s not the way I see it for myself. Some people take it up as a sort of personal processing of the world — it is that for me, but I’m a poet as a way of living. I have to respond to the world, and not just ask it to feed me and heal me, nourish me. For me, writing is a kind of critique, it’s a way of pointing a finger at an enemy and telling them to stop doing something. It’s a way of challenging the status quo. For me, it’s an absolutely political endeavour.

EL: Do you think it’s a common struggle for writers?
DV: […] I think what happens with a lot of work that’s about cultural identity is that there’s this tendency...
My 10th grade teacher, Mr. Fingerhut, once told me he was going to buy me a “back patting machine for Christmas,” because he thought my own arm must be getting tired from patting my own back. At the risk of proving Mr. Fingerhut correct, I have to indulge in a little back-patting.

I’m proud of every hire we’ve made in the Writer’s Centre, starting with our Associate Director, the incomparable Heidi Stalla. Together, we’ve been able to create a unique writers’ centre that combines the traditional academic role of a writing centre with a literary centre, a combination as groundbreaking as that of Yale-NUS’ blending of Eastern and Western traditions. We have an awe-inspiring staff, all equally dedicated to being a part of something special, including our five lecturers, our program manager, and our DF.

In short, when my plane touched the ground at Changi, I can tell you this honestly: I was happy to be back, happy to return to “my people,” to re-engage and re-ignite our common commitment to the culture of writing at Yale-NUS. I missed this place and nearly sprinted through Immigration.

Robin Hemley
Director, Writing Program
Professor of Humanities
Writer-in-Residence

FROM THE DIRECTOR
continued from page 1

SEVEN WAYS TO IMPRESS YOUR EDITOR IN NEW YORK
by Raeden Richardson

1. If Mr. Editor has a problem with the sneakers he ordered and one morning says to the full-time staff, ‘Has anyone ever ordered anything off Zappos?’, then make sure you say ‘Of course, I’m an expert’, even though a) you are not on the pay roll, b) you don’t know what Zappos is—most of your shoes come from your older brother when he outgrows them and c) you were planning to leave sometime nine-o’clock tonight.

2. If Mr. Editor complains to the full-time staff that there’s an awful smell in his office behind the Warhol print, then make sure you know where the stepladder is, even though a) you are not on the pay roll and b) you’ve got a feeling that the rat isn’t quite dead yet.

3. If Mr. Editor ever announces the office softball team needs someone to play right field in the game against Vanity Fair, then make sure you offer your services, even though a) you’ve only ever played t-ball in primary school and b) you had a date planned in Central Park and you’ll have to cancel, telling her ‘It’s a work thing’, or else she’ll show up at the Central Park Meadows and find you running Gatorades all afternoon for the Digital Manager and the Web Editor.

4. If Mr. Editor wears a Ralph Lauren linen shirt, then go buy a Ralph Lauren linen shirt. If Mr. Editor wears Birkenstocks, then go buy a pair of Birkenstocks. If Mr. Editor eats fifteen-dollar ($22.50SGD) crouton salads from Hudson Market, then buy those fifteen-dollar ($22.50SGD) crouton salads from Hudson Market even though a) you’re going to burn more calories digesting the salad than you’ll gain from eating it and b) you are not on the pay roll.

Five ways to impress your editor in New York by Raeden Richardson

EL: WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE NOTION THAT CERTAIN THEMATIC EXPLORATIONS FIT WELL INTO CERTAIN POETIC FORMS?
DV: [...] You can’t say that there’s only one experiment I do no matter what my hypothesis is. That wouldn’t make sense in science, so why would it make sense in art? I will go so far as to say that [form] gives a shape in which I can think. But I really hate it when people give me shapes in which to think! I want to be able to call the terms of that argument. I want to be able to settle them for myself, rather than receiving it. And I think so much of this is about how received forms negotiate power. In the image of the shelter: the idea of a sonnet as a shelter — why is the poet seeking shelter? Why do they need to be held by this European form? Why? I tend not to romanticize the fixed form.

Divya Victor and Gish Jen will be reading their work in the Saga Rector’s Commons on October 24, at 7pm.

WRITERS’ CENTRE
READING SERIES:
DIVYA VICTOR
continued from page 1

to self-objectify towards a purpose of clarity. “If you just understood how I was, how I present myself, then you would be illuminated and I would be understood.” But that’s not really what happens.

Seven ways to impress your editor in New York by Raeden Richardson

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5. If Mr. Editor feels the office is too hot and starts walking around barefoot, do not take off your Birkenstocks too. It’s not worth the risk of stepping on a paperclip or a staple or one of the Kaweco Sport fountain pens, cutting open your foot and bleeding out by the N’Espresso machine.

6. If Mr. Editor arrives in the office to find a pair of black lace panties on the bronze bust of George Plimpton, his predecessor, then nod your head emphatically and send him a high-five when he deduces that last night’s book launch must have been a success.

7. Once you’ve covered the first six steps, then it’s time to sort through the slush pile as you’re supposed to. Happy schmoozing!
FIRST WEEKS IN SINGAPORE

by Dini Parayitam

Yes, it is clean—I don’t spot much in the way of a ‘plastic wrapper’ on the ground—but occasionally, cigarette butts do line the path of some poor snail. But what I hadn’t pictured before exiting the Changi Airport in July—and I blame Google Images for this misrepresentation—is the amount of green that would fill my eyes. It’s strange, considering when I think ‘island,’ I think palm trees, beaches, flora and fauna that wouldn’t otherwise be found in more urban areas, but prior to my arrival, I didn’t imagine Singapore as an island. Instead, it was a metropolis, therefore, metallic. I imagined the green, as in other cities, would be relegated to its own proper corner, pruned, repurposed, fenced, a Central Park—but, here, it is interspersed in seemingly equal proportions, a nature to soften the edges of the coarser architecture. From my window, the buildings of Kent Ville resemble modern renditions of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The footbridges are lined in pink flowering bushes, thin and sparse, but nonetheless, contrasting the concrete. Even the campus has an eco-pond in the middle and grassy courtyards for every residential college. One afternoon, I returned to my floor to find some gardeners hacking away at the overgrown ivy. “Don’t!” I hollered, surprised and embarrassing myself in front of them. They turned to me, smiled sheepishly, and assured me the plant would grow back, spanning again the two levels with its length; realizing my distress, they pointed to the new extending vines with their shears. Back in my room, I consoled myself that by the time the plant returns to its unruly state, I will have familiarized myself with Yale-NUS College, and to a greater degree, the city.

In Iowa City, on days I didn’t teach, my life revolved around Market Street. I’d walk two blocks down from my one-bedroom cottage to Highground Café, write at one of the tables until the effects of my Americano double-shot espresso wore off, then, cross the street for a nightcap at George’s Buffet or Foxhead, swing by John’s Grocery Store for a midnight fiery Cheeto, before moseying home, gawking at the window-display of Friday’s Barber Shop or the Haunted Bookstore, maybe wave to a nurse in front of the neon red Emergency sign of Mercy Hospital. If I was feeling adventurous, I’d remain out, late into the night and early morning with Avro; maybe, wed visit the Black Angel in the graveyard, buy Mami’s burritoes, or play basketball in the rain. Of course, it took four years to reach this level of familiarity with the place. And that also was a simpler transition; I had grown up mostly in similar university towns—where the cops outnumber the students, and on Saturdays during football season, club music echoes like war songs across the town from morning until at least 2 A.M. Those nights, I’d wait suspiciously at street corners for some cop to stop and interrogate me about my ‘level of intoxication,’ especially when I hadn’t been drinking at all; but I must have appeared too hopeful, too alert—innocent at worst; and, at best, as if I just belonged there, on that sidewalk and under the changing traffic signals. Still, I’d wait for a chance to prove it—that I’m right where I should be. Here, I catch myself doing the same thing, except inside the Yale-NUS Library. I’m most elated when the security guard requests to see my access card. I recognize him as much as I believe he must recognize me by now, more than a month into the semester, but we continue this little dance. In those seconds, while I struggle to pull out the lanyard conveniently at the bottom of my purse or bookbag, I feel I am asserting my place, even if just at the college for now, and maybe, later in the city.

Traveling on the MRT, I wonder about the widespread reputation of Clean Singapore—the rumor and reality of it. Especially after learning about and experiencing the science-fictional-sounding ‘haze’ blow through, irritating throats and lungs, forcing people to hide behind blue cotton masks and speak in rasps and coughs. How does a small and populated country, expanding upwards into the only ‘real’ free and uncharted territory, with a culture of building, preserving, and rebuilding, still have the energy to devote its attention to a footpath or corner of the beach? What of the immigrant or local manpower? And the citizens who hold the wrapper until a bin is nearby? This strict maintenance doesn’t seem to be about the fear of fines for littering or any successful prohibition of chewing gum. It stems, I believe, from something even deeper than respect for the environment. If I had to guess, as an attempt to understand, I’d say it’s rooted in a sentiment that equally values and prioritizes the private and the public spaces. A sense of ownership that encompasses every inch of Singapore from one side to the other. Because area is consciously limited, the private, perhaps, extends into the public and vice versa. People feel responsible for the park as much as they do for the personal kitchen; this responsibility, though, is about affection not entitlement, and is something I haven’t encountered before. WC
Hello, my name is Carissa and you can call me Car…
I recently got back from England where I discovered many things about myself and the world.
My Ph.D. research, or my life-long interest it seems, is on place in 20th century women’s writing. I study how continental philosophy, feminism, and modernist poetics help us understand how we inhabit and perceive places.
Work aside, I like to hang out in quiet corners of this busy city with friends or a good book. I also like to hunt for good, cheap records, and find constellations if the night sky permits (I saw Uranus once!). So far light pollution has prevailed…
It’s good to be back. I’m excited to be at Yale-NUS, especially with the Writers’ Centre, which to me stands for a creative and liminal space. It’s only been a month but I’ve gleaned much. I’m looking forward to good conversations! WC

LITERARY AWARDS
SEND IN YOUR POETRY, PROSE, OR PLAYWRITING BY NOVEMBER 18TH AND STAND A CHANCE AT WINNING FIRST PLACE, SECOND PLACE, OR AN HONOURABLE MENTION

DUTCH MONKEY WATCHING
reflections on an RCX trip by Sanna McGregor

A gathering of students sit on the grass, curled over notebooks and only occasionally glancing up at the river or the boats and government buildings by its banks. They’re describing spaces they’ve seen today in the first writing prompt of Cendana’s RCX trip to Kuching, Malaysia. They’re looking at what stands out to them, what they’d like to know more about. Their descriptions are of the brightly coloured, tightly wrapped lapis cake left invitingly outside shops to tempt us in, of the deep ruby shawl rubbing up against fingers’ stroke to feel the weave and rustle, of the river and market stalls and people busying about. Or on the following days, reflecting on our experiences in Bako National Park surrounded by bearded pigs and the long-nosed Dutch monkeys. We stumbled into seeing the proboscis monkeys, or neusapen as I’ve known them. Lithe legs balance on every twig of tree, perched quite comfortably among the leaves they’re munching. Two youths play fight in the branches, a mature male looking down that long, protruding nose at them. I wanted to know if that’s where our noses come from, why he’s not looking down at us. Perhaps like some of the students with us, that’s what I wrote a postcard home about. The RCX trip was as much a travel experience as a writing one, with every prompt building on the preceding one so we could guide our own thinking onto paper. I, for one, returned with Borneo on the brain and page. WC
The NYT Desk in New Delhi

by Kaushik Swaminathan

The New York Times bureau in New Delhi is hard to forget. Tucked away in an unassuming alley in the city’s central market, it occupies a small second floor in a colonial-era walk-up building. Inside, the walls are covered with vintage and iconic front pages of the newspaper, and rows of bookshelves overflow with old magazines and biographies. A group of reporters and researchers sit in an open office; most are usually out on a story, some stay in to write. It feels like the quintessential office of a print publication.

I spent ten weeks this summer at the NYT working closely with its South Asia bureau chief, Ellen Barry, and senior correspondent, Geeta Anand. Both Pulitzer-prize winners, they led an eight-member team to cover political and cultural trends in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Maldives, and published anywhere between five and seven stories on a weekly basis.

In a small office, stories are seldom assigned to you. Rather, you have to be self-motivated and pitch your own ideas regardless of whether you are a summer intern or a veteran reporter with twenty-five years of experience. I would begin my mornings with a thorough press review of local media outlets and think tanks, listing out five potential stories that would be relevant to a New York Times audience.

I pitched my first successful daily news story during my second week. Health authorities in a south Indian state found a strain of polio in sewage water, threatening India’s newly-received polio-free status. Within four hours, I was tasked to call and get on-the-record comments from government officials and the director of polio operations for Unicef India, and write a 400-word story. Through the night, up until 2 am, editors at the international desk in New York would call me to double-check facts and phrase changes.

Altogether, I wrote or collaborated on more than eight stories. In June, I worked closely with Geeta on a profile of a prominent Indian political, Subramanian Swamy. In July, I covered the Dhaka terrorist attacks, writing profiles on the alleged perpetrators, speaking with terrorism experts, and scouring social media for their virtual profiles. In August, I wrote an obituary for one of India’s most famous writer-activists, Mahasweta Devi.

Millions of people rely on the NYT as their only source of news, and sometimes their source of truth. It’s a powerful feeling to be a journalist for the New York Times.
COVER LETTERS & FIRST PUBLICATION

I first started sending out my work for publication when I was sixteen or so. At the time, I attended a small boarding school in the mountains of Tennessee, where I joined the staff of the school literary magazine. My Junior year of high school, I pretty much was the school literary magazine. My submissions accounted for half of the magazine, thirteen or so poems, a short story and even a haiku on the back cover of the magazine. Naturally, I never want to see them again, though someone recently sent me an email from the University of Georgia saying that she’d found my old high school magazine and read it. An old classmate brought it to my latest high school reunion, too, a nice gesture, but kind of horrifying, too. My high school yearbook picture from that year was only marginally more horrifying.

I wrote mostly poetry at the time, and someone suggested I send it out. There was no such thing as electronic submissions, not even laptops, so sending work out was like being a small manufacturer: typing the poems, making copies, getting a self-addressed stamped envelope at the post office to receive your work back from the magazine to which you had sent it, writing a cover letter, sealing everything up and mailing it. Not much of that chain of actions survives in the digital age, which is just as well, except perhaps for the cover letter.

When I was in my teens, I had no idea how to write a cover letter. I did everything wrong, such as (and here I cringe), evaluating my own poems, writing screeds on the state of American poetry, acting presumptuous and pretentious at every opportunity. I remember one time sending a batch of poems to the American Poetry Review with a three-page cover letter attached in which I provided for their edification a critique of the contemporary North American poetry landscape that I was proud of until the moment after I dropped the letter in the mailbox. As soon as I let it drop, I desperately wanted the letter back, certain in the knowledge that I was a fool. The passage of time has not diminished that feeling, in this instance.

I am certain that the editors of the American Poetry Review had some wonderful laughs over that letter, and to this day maybe it’s in a special folder known as the “UFO File.” I later became acquainted with UFO files when I served as an editor of a literary magazine. The UFO file is where editors keep the strangest and most outlandish cover letters they receive. It’s one of the guilty pleasures of editors—not something they could ever publish, of course, but when they need to be cheered up, they pull these letters out and pass them around the office.

The best guidelines for sending cover letters is to keep them simple and to let the work speak for itself. A few pointers are to the right.

When I was eighteen, after receiving a number of rejections, and a couple of small regional publications, two of my poems were accepted by the Carolina Quarterly, an important literary magazine that’s been around since 1948. For most of the Autumn semester, I visited my school library every day, waiting for my poems to appear, and I think the staff members in the periodicals room were sick of me asking them every day if the Carolina Quarterly had arrived yet. It was also the first time I was paid anything for my writing, though that wasn’t necessary to trigger the elation I felt at having my first big (in my mind) publication. Five whole dollars. But it also made me a little too sure of myself—hence, a year later, I was sending foolish missives to the American Poetry Review, and learning the hard way that sometimes the less one says about oneself, the better. WC

1. NEVER EXPLAIN OR INTERPRET YOUR OWN WORK IN A COVER LETTER.
2. DON’T TRY TO SELL YOUR WORK IN THE COVER LETTER, e.g., “This is a tale of bravery of and heartbreak . . . ”
3. DON’T WRITE THREE-PAGE (or even two-page) CRITIQUES OF ANYTHING.
4. BE FAMILIAR WITH THE PUBLICATION TO WHICH YOU’RE SENDING. This is probably the best piece of advice I can give. If you know the kind of work the magazine likes and you personally like what they publish, you have a much better chance of publishing your own work there.
5. IF YOU’VE PUBLISHED BEFORE AND/OR HAVE WON AN AWARD, DO MENTION THESE, otherwise, simply write something along the lines of this →

Dear Editor,
Please consider the attached story “A Tale of Bravery and Heartbreak,” for the publication in __________. Thank you.

6. MOST JOURNALS, ELECTRONIC AND OTHERWISE, ACCEPT SIMULTANEOUS SUBMISSIONS, but if you’re fortunate enough to have something accepted, notify any other magazine to which you’ve submitted the same material ASAP.
7. SUBMIT NO MORE THAN FIVE POEMS AT ONCE, ONE STORY, OR ONE ESSAY. All prose should be double-spaced and the font should be something standard such as Times New Roman.
8. THE WRITERS’ CENTRE HAS A NUMBER OF EXCELLENT LITERARY MAGAZINES AND OTHER PERIODICALS WE’D BE HAPPY TO SHARE WITH YOU. The best literary magazines, while they might have only a couple of thousand readers, are read by influential editors and agents and a lot of up-and-coming writers are discovered in these venues. Web-based publications have enormous readerships sometimes and there are quite a few excellent publications among them. Likewise, many former print journals, such as the venerable TriQuarterly Magazine out of Northwestern University, have gone entirely to web publication. If you’d like to send out your work but don’t know where to start, I’m happy to give you some tips as are the other writers on staff at the Writers’ Centre.
"I don’t yet know when I shall succeed in learning not to write; the obsession, the obligation are half a century old. My right little finger is slightly bent; that is because the weight of my hand always rested on it as I wrote, like a kangaroo leaning back on its tail. There is a tired spirit deep inside of me that still continues its gourmet’s quest for a better word, and then for a better one still."

At eighty-one, Colette was still searching, the bent finger pining, like an amputee and her phantom limb. What is more sentimental than peonies? Purer than the lily of the valley? Sweeter than cherries and mirabelles? There must be better words than “flower” and “fruit.” Still, it is in Flowers and Fruit, the essay “Flora and Pomona,” where we find the lushest portraits of the eponymous heroines. Still, none—it is true—has written so emotionally and enthusiastically of gardens as Colette.

It was the garden, not the débutantes and courtesans, esprit or seductive prose, that drew me to Colette. The reality that often eludes her protagonists finds its place in some garden, lived in the chatter of pigeons, the floriferous habits of daffodils and wisterias. Rusted leaves age on behalf of the eternal child; wintry branches reach for brighter times. I’ve always thought that I adored Colette for her nostalgic return to nature, for I quite dislike the concrete jungle of the modern city. But as I read her autobiography and understood her impulse, I realized it was not so much the evocation of nature as it was her regard for life that welled over the Claudine novels, Chéri, Gigi, Break of Day, and so forth.

“Regarde!” was Colette’s last word. The English, “regard,” does not come close to the French. Regarde, as it meant to her, is to look, behold, wonder, esteem, respect, favour, live. In it is also life’s equation—the sum of obligation and obsession. The need to write is almost like the reflex to breathe. It never ceases; the end has no end. Unless, of course, the last breath is drawn.

Little wonder the spirit is tired.

But, although the end is grave and the best a myth, one carries on, hoping that living gets easier with each breath; that writing gets better with each word. Colette lived in the hope for a better life; a better write. Her little right finger bore the marks of her cross. We, too, have our writer’s bump. Feel that callous on your finger? It bears the weight of your life.

FROM THE NIGHTSTAND of Laurel Fantauzzo

MOSQUITOLAND, David Arnold. When I visited my literary agents in New York City last April, they sent me home with a suitcase-load of young adult novels they represent. This is one of them. I’m writing a YA novel with a 16-year-old girl teenager’s voice, so I was intrigued by Arnold’s portrayal of a young woman, possibly mentally unstable, in search of her ill mother. Writers always read with two eyes; one eye for pleasure, and one eye for raiding the craft toolbox, as it were. This book reminded me of the importance of withholding information and trusting the reader to be hungry for more.

KILLING AND DYING, Adrian Tomine. One of my escapist childhood sanctuaries was the library—namely, any library. I sometimes wander the Yale-NUS Library with no particular aim in mind but to find something that intrigues me, as I did when I was a child. Tomine is a comics artist whose work I followed obsessively in late high school and early college, so I was happy to find a newer collection of his on the Yale-NUS shelves. My passion for Tomine’s perspective has waned as my own thematic concerns have broadened, but this series of quiet, graphic vignettes, shot through with mundane longing and failure, still has me nostalgic.

CHANI NICHOLAS. All right, it’s not a concrete book on my nightstand, but Chani Nicholas is a California astrologer beloved by feminists and members of LGBTQ communities. She speaks in brief koans that tend to be challenging and soothing in a leftist American way; for example, “We are more free than any amount of money could ever make us when we refuse to be owned by our fears,” or, “These are deep and tender times, so I’ll be tender with my depth and deeply tender with myself.” What can I say? Nicholas helps me sleep easier.

THE HOT BREAD KITCHEN COOKBOOK, Jessamyn Waldman Rodriguez & Julia Turshen. I like to read cookbooks because they always have happy endings. This one helped me make homemade corn tortillas, which are difficult to come by in Singapore, and thus rendered me a happy reader and eater.
Some time ago I was part of NYU Abu Dhabi's first graduating class, working on my own capstone, applying to jobs, and trying to enjoy my last year of college. Here are a few things I picked up from the experience – hopefully they will keep you going with your own projects!

1. **Write Every Day, Just for a Bit.**
Think of writing as exercise. You wouldn't set aside six hours on Sunday for the gym and then skip Monday-Saturday. So don't do that with your capstone. Write 15 minutes a day, even if it is messy, to keep yourself in shape.

2. **Don't Wait Until You “Know” Something to Start Writing.**
This goes with the point above. Don't come up with a research question, try to work it out in your head and in bullet points until you've figured it out, and then start writing. Get comfortable with writing while you are still uncertain about the answers.

3. **Think of Your Capstone As Many, Regular-Sized Papers.**
This will probably be the longest piece of writing you have ever tackled, and thinking about an end goal of 30, 50, or 100 pages is daunting. Instead, break down your capstone into parts: maybe you're writing three 15-page papers over the course of the year or three 10-page papers. Or maybe (sorry!) it's four 25-page papers. In any case, breaking it down can make it easier to think about.

4. **Be Interested in Your Capstone, But Separate Yourself From Your Writing.**
This is tricky, but it is best to find a balance between being genuinely interested in your topic and feeling detached from your own writing. Love your capstone topic, but remember that your worth as a person or student is not equal to the quality of your latest draft.

5. **Listen to Your Librarians and Just Download a Bibliographic Software!**
I waited until I was near my final draft to finally download Zotero. It was a game-changer.

6. **You Will Likely Be Pleased That Wrote a Capstone After You Graduate.**
I haven't yet met anyone who wrote an undergraduate thesis or a capstone and regretted going through the process, no matter how difficult. I have, however, met people who opted out of capstone and do regret it.

7. **Others Have Done This Before You, Even If You Are the First at Yale-NUS.**
Yale-NUS is a new concept, but requiring seniors to complete capstone projects is not. Hopefully it is reassuring to remember that while you are the first graduating from Yale-NUS, you are certainly not the first to go through the process of writing a senior thesis.