I remember reading Laurel Fantauzzo’s application to the Nonfiction Writing Program at The University of Iowa when I was its director. I was immediately drawn to the application, in part, I admit, because I always kept an eye out for Filipino and Filipino American writers. I have more than a passing interest in the country, having written about it extensively, and being married into the culture. While Laurel’s background caught my attention, her writing held it. At the time, she was writing about Filipino cuisine and how and why it had made so little impact at the time in mainstream American culture. The essays Laurel subsequently wrote for my workshop and for other venues were always smart and lively, but it wasn’t until she started working on the project that would become her thesis and then her new book, *The First Impulse*, that I felt she had really found her material, or it had found her.

The subject of the book, the murder of a young couple of film critics in the Philippines, one Filipino and the other Croatian, had little to do with her own life, at least on the surface. She had never met the couple, but something about their story (not only the tragedy and mystery surrounding their murders, but something about their love for one another and love for the Philippines) began to obsess her. Who knows how we settle on subjects such as this? They present themselves to us sometimes as chance encounters. It was this way with Laurel’s book and I had the privilege to witness its metamorphosis over several years from a simple whodunit to a much more complex story that was in some ways about much more than this murder. In some ways, it became an homage to Filipino Film, to crossing cultures, to leave-takings and introductions. Like all books, it became much more than Laurel ever bargained for and tied her even more firmly to the country of her mother’s birth while at the same time showing her the ways in which she was not a part of the Philippines. An education, in other words, not just for her, but for the fortunate reader as well. 

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**HOMAGE FOR LAUREL F**

*by Robin Hemley*

Some concepts start to make sense only once you approach them from a different angle. It’s like having a fresh pair of eyes on your essay, or one of those optical illusions that you can only see once you make a conscious effort to let your gaze drift, unfocussed, across the page. For me, certain mysteries of the academic essay only really began to unravel themselves once I grasped these same concepts in creative writing.

1. **EVERY NEW PARAGRAPH SHOULD START A DIFFERENT IDEA.**
   (OR AT LEAST A DIFFERENT VARIATION OF THE IDEA THAT YOU ORIGINALLY INTRODUCED).

My first attempt at an extended piece of creative nonfiction had multiple paragraphs of imagery which expressed vaguely different themes, but did not serve to move the essay forward in any way. Once I realized this, I began to pay more attention to it in my academic essays as well.

Does your new paragraph introduce a distinct idea? On the other hand, if you are introducing a distinct idea, have you made sure that you are starting a new paragraph? How does each new paragraph build on the previous ones? Paying attention to structure on a paragraph-to-paragraph level can help dramatically improve an essay’s flow and sense of progress.

continued on page 2

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**HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE ESSAY**

*by Isa Ho*
2. On second drafts, start from a blank slate.

Have you ever looked back at your essay after the third hour of writing, only to find that your previously cogent argument has seemingly dissolved into a string of unintelligible letters? Try opening a blank document. Well, my first piece of advice would be to take a break. But after that, open that new blank document. Doesn't the wide open, wordless space feel promising?

This suggestion may cause you no small amount of horror and dread, but having the space to re-outline your essay’s structure and argument before incorporating what worked from the previous draft—and setting aside what didn’t work—can be the turning point you need with an assignment, particularly once that deadline starts looming overhead.

3. Dig deep.

We all have our favourite essays that we’ve written. Accordingly, most of us also have those essays where it was obvious that we were only going through the motions. The best essays tend to come from a place of personal motivation or passion, whether it’s a specific paragraph that you find interesting, a theory that bewilders you, or even a scene that you dislike. When formulating your problem or question, think about the specific areas of a text or theory that might cause you joy, frustration, or confusion. Then try to figure out why. That personal motive may, in time, lead to your essay’s main argument.

4. Take a break.

This applies to all things. If the words are beginning to blur before your eyes, it’s time to shut your laptop or set down your pen, and take a little time off. Ideally, this means leaving some space between your first and second drafts. If not, even a 10-minute snack break between 50-minute binge writing sessions is still better than nothing. WC

Books & Banter

by Jennifer Gargiulo, featuring Vijay Seshadri
(winner of the 2014 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry)

* What is your image of a writer?
Someone who is perpetually morose and depressed.

* Your favourite author?*
Shakespeare

* Last great book that you would recommend?
The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier by Richard Eaton.

* Best writing tip you ever received?*
A writer writes.

* First book you remember enjoying as a child?
A fantasy book about 2 kids on a Hawaiian island. One grows up to be the last queen of Hawaii, Lily of Liliuokalani.

* What is on your night table?*
The Plume Serpent by DH Lawrence.

* Have you been to the Writers’ Centre?
I am at the Writers’ Centre now.

* Would you recommend going there?*
Yes, it’s always great to have a place where writers can congregate.

* Best thing about Yale-NUS?*
Very smart students.

* And finally, your life in one sentence?*
Mysterious. Well, that’s really just one word. WC
A cliffhanger is a suspense-full situation. The point at which the narrative quickly turns and reveals something revelatory. Aristotle calls it peripeteia. Today the cliffhanger takes the form of freak accidents in *Grey’s Anatomy*.

To hang is to be caught up in the moment of the narrative and wait. Wait for the next chapter, the sequel, the coup de grâce. Aron Ralston was trapped between rocks high above ground before he amputated his arm. The suspension, or sensation, was an effect. The other star of *127 Hours*, and unnamed antagonist, was the cliff.

Suspense is no mystery. But the cliff—what exactly is the cliff?

The vertical monolith of immortal rock towering over waves kissing hard at its feet. And don't forget the edge—the jagged ridge that promises a view that tapers off into infinity. Transfixed, the wayfarer does not see the loose rocks or hear the crashing ocean. Then she falls; she is now part of the view.

The fall is dramatic because the cliff is steep. Focus is on the fall but not the art of chiselling the thing that precipitated it. “Whose hands?” Nobody asks.

The cliffhanger isn't passé. The cliffs have just got smaller and less vertical. Falls are predictable: a tree branch saves the day. Different people tumbling off the same cliff. They fall from the same place; they end in the same place. Storytellers hold on to the cliffhanger, desperate to seize the restless audience with cheap suspense, but they forget the cliff.

When the Little Prince surveyed Earth and thought it craggy and sad, he was wrong. That world had gradient and depressions, cliffs and oceans, places to climb and fall from. If it were a flat disc, there would be no stories.
CONSULTATION CORNER: 
SEVEN NEW PEER WRITING TUTORS!

The Writers’ Centre is excited to welcome seven new peer tutors to the team after a full semester of training in writing pedagogy and practice. You can book a slot with a peer writing tutor through our regular booking system: www.yalenus.mywconline.com.

CHRYSAL HO, Literature major (Class of 2019)

Most embarrassing writing moment: Typo errors in anything circulated in class :( especially poems, because people think it’s a questionable creative decision.

One takeaway from Peer Tutor Training: Drafts come in all shapes and sizes and they are all important

What you’re reading at the moment: What Gives Us Our Names, by Alvin Pang and Frankenstein for class!

HELENA AUERSWALD, Global Affairs major (Class of 2019)

Favourite place/setting for writing: The train or bus. Movement and constant change of scenery help me write freely without getting too wrapped up in the details.

Favourite part of the writing process: Editing. If writing is laying the puzzle pieces out on the table, then editing is making sure each is in the right place and all the empty spaces are filled in. Perhaps not an objectively thrilling metaphor, but I love puzzles.

#1 Writing tip: Define your terms.

BRYANT CHAN, Arts & Humanities major (Class of 2017)

Most embarrassing writing moment: Probably getting a whopping C- for my first MST essay, in which I completely lost track of the prompt and ended up with a rambling diatribe accusing Marx of antisemitism in the essay ‘On the Jewish Question’, which wasn't even the assigned text. That was not fun.

Favourite part of the writing process: The end. I know, I know, there's always someone who'll say 'no work is every truly finished', to which I say it's finished when I damn well say it's finished. The sheer relief of having completed something is always so, so sweet.
**JOLENE LUM, Physical Sciences major, potential Literature minor (Class of 2019)**

One takeaway from Peer Tutor Training: Everyone has the potential to see the light of how academic writing works, but everyone still has to work hard and practice to write well.

Greatest challenge when it comes to writing: Editing/Having to restructure an essay because I got overexcited. It’s awful.

Favourite part of the writing process: Making links and transitions to other ideas, and going ‘omg eureka’ in my seat.

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**CHRISTOPHER TEE, Literature major, Arts & Humanities minor (Class of 2017)**

Favourite Yale-NUS writing assignment to date: My capstone project. Just kidding. I really liked the first 10-page research paper that I wrote for ‘Art and Politics’ at the end of freshmen year. It was the first time I had to write such a long (yikes!) essay following my own research design (double yikes!)

Citations! Call me a nerd, but I really like the structure and finesse of well cited essays. It’s the attention to detail that really impresses me, and good citations help you do research, and act as the best defence against plagiarism.

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**THU TRUONG, Literature major, potential Philosophy minor (Class of 2018)**

Favourite place/setting for writing: The window table on the first floor of the library (more specifically, the middle one of the three tables).

Greatest challenge when it comes to writing: how to reach out to readers in the most compelling and sincere way possible - the craft I’ve been trying to master both in academic and creative writing.

#1 Writing tip: Read it aloud. If something doesn’t sound right, it probably isn’t right.

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**ISA HO, Literature major (Class of 2017)**

Favourite Yale-NUS Writing Assignment to date: It’s a toss-up between my final essay for my travel writing class on food in Prague, or my Horror Films essay on self-reflexivity in horror.

Greatest challenge when it comes to writing: STRUCTURE. Also, starting the writing process is always hard.

#1 Writing tip: Read.

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**PEER TUTORS**

The Writers’ Centre will be accepting applications for additional peer tutors in late February. Keep an eye on our website and Facebook for forthcoming details on the application process and deadlines. writers.centre@yale-nus.edu.sg
Dear Larry,

Ever since Literature and Humanities in Freshmen year, I’ve developed the tendency to yell literary quotes intermittently when I orgasm. As you can imagine, this is putting quite a serious strain on my relationship with my suite mates, my old literature and humanities professor, my Mexican fighting fish, and so on.

Just last night, for instance, as I was finishing another round of slap and tickle, I collapsed onto the hammock and yelled, “Every streetlamp that I pass beats like a fatalistic drum.” Several frustrated members of Saga College posted on the FB group page in the passive aggressive “I-know-who-you-are-but-won’t-name-you” manner so common in our school. I even received a concerned email from my Vice-Rector that I can forward to you later.

However, I must admit that my lovers, themselves fans of the Common Curriculum, find the gesture endearing, in the best, and respond with some other quote. I’m building quite a reputation in the circles I frequent, and a large part of me doesn’t want this to end.

And so I write to you. How far is too far to love good writing when it comes at a cost to your personal relationships? What do you do when the writers you love are on your mind all the time? How do you “switch off” while at the same time stay “turned on”?

Thanks for your help,
Coming-to-terms-with-Poetry

Dear Coming-to-terms,

Oh dear. I’m not sure if T.S. Elliot will approve of the hapless ends to which you’ve subjected his verse, but I suspect he would be very very amused.

To have phrases, words so intimately connected to pleasure, surprise, recklessness, exclamation, as it appears to be the case for you, can only suggest the possibility of adventure and discovery, if not trouble, as it already seems to be the case. It suggests, at the least, a wonderful relationship to language: one that treats words not as mere instruments of thoughts, but really spaces around which our feelings and memories sometimes accrue. It makes me think of the way children first discover words: rolling it on their tongues, flinging it across rooms. The way we love certain words, not because of what they mean, but perhaps because of their sound, or how they look on the page. Words like “embrace”, or “tumultuous”, or well, “disgrace” too. Aren’t they precisely, and simultaneously more than, what they mean? It’s the stuff of poetry.

That your friends are responding in kind, flinging their own verses back at yours, is a good thing. It means it’s infectious. That some are offended by it or don’t quite know what to say, is however also to be expected. Not everyone will dare admit this reckless relationship to words.

So for the sake of the peace of the kingdom, perhaps the next time you feel the urge to blurt out a section of “Waste Land”, while you are wasted, think twice. Wonder if it is good at that moment to scream, or to just murmur to yourself. I know one little thing that might solve the trick: write. I think it’s time for you to write.

In solidarity with the word,
Larry

WC

The team went to NYU Abu Dhabi for a conference and inspiration in November 2016
One thing I have learned the hard way about writing essays is the importance of using - while not being restrained by - a solid and detailed outline. For one thing, having an outline helps me not just to clarify and organize the evidence with which I am working; it also suggests to me the best argument that that evidence seems to support. Organizing the evidence in this way can also imply a certain structure to the argument, and this structure becomes invaluable in shaping the essay from introduction through body paragraphs to conclusion. (For example, does the evidence suggest that certain points must be established before later points can be entertained? Or that certain points must be established before they can be nuanced and complicated? Then you’ve got an implied order of operations, right there, and almost an actual sequence of points and paragraphs). Moreover, on a more mundane practical level, if I don’t have time to pound out an entire, fleshed-out argument in one sitting, as I did at university when my papers were typically under ten pages long, having a detailed outline allows me to break off in my writing, go to class or to the gym or to the post office or whatever, and then return and pick up fairly easily where I left off.

There’s a caveat to working with an outline, though: too, I have to be careful not to feel bound by it. As I work with the available evidence in developing my case, I might note that the evidence does not fit the case as cleanly as I thought. That happens to all of us, probably. It can be frustrating in that it means more work and adjustment, but it is also the moment where I learn the most from what I am working on, because it is the moment where my own assumptions are essentially challenged. Having an outline in advance allows me to clarify and codify those assumptions beforehand, and trying to be flexible enough to adjust in the event my hypothesis turns out not to hold true helps clarify to me what I got wrong and how I can alter my case in order to make the argument viable and fair. WC

FROM THE NIGHTSTAND

THE NEAPOLITAN QUARTET. Elena Ferrante. If you are a friend, family member, acquaintance...or even a stranger who happened to be sitting across from me in a train compartment, chances are I tried to engage you in a conversation about Elena Ferrante. The enigmatic Italian author is as famous for writing the four novels, which trace Italian history from post-war to present day, as she is for jealously safeguarding her anonymity in a time when writers are usually encouraged to self-promote their work. I was blown away by the intense and complex friendship between the two protagonists Lila and Lenu’ and felt an intense sense of loss after finishing the books, which compelled me to immediately reread the entire work. One thing I found intriguing was why this Italian author so celebrated abroad received such scarce recognition in her own country. Last summer, finding myself in Naples (the very heart of Ferrante territory), I tried solving this enigma. Was it just a case of nemo propheta in patria or something more. An old woman sitting in front of the local grocery store weighing fruit, seemed to provide at least one possible answer. Shrugging her shoulders and muttering in dialect, she offered: “Why do I need Elena Ferrante to tell me about life in Naples. I can just take a walk around the neighborhood.” As the ‘neighborhood’ figures quite prominently in Ferrante’s work, I couldn’t completely discount this signora’s opinion. There is also the very distinct possibility that the excellent translation in English, by New Yorker editor Ann Goldstein, greatly added to the finished product and significantly contributed to the resulting international acclaim. I admit to having preferred the English version myself which was so good that Goldstein was a prime suspect of having penned the books herself. The power of an excellent translation is nowhere more evident than in THE VEGETARIAN, Han Kang, ironically the very book that beat Ferrante’s The Story of the Lost Child (fourth instalment of the Neapolitan Quartet) and took home the 2016 Man Booker International Award. This moving, and very unsettling story, by Korean author Han Kang, about a soft-spoken woman who retreats deeply into herself was translated so beautifully into English by Deborah Smith as to warrant an equal division of the prize between author and translator. And finally something slightly different, THE LIFE-CHANGING MAGIC OF TIDYING UP, Marie Kondo. I find self-help guides strangely compelling but especially this one, the runaway hit written by the Japanese guru of de-cluttering, Marie Kondo. In a lyrical prose, even when addressing one’s spice rack or sock collection, the author advocates keeping only those things which “spark joy.” Wouldn’t it be tempting to do that with everything and not just with the stuff that is hidden away in our closets? WC
“I think... Well I think if I had to choose I’d rather be happy than write... If I can have my life all over again... and if I could choose...”

“If to live is to write, why would one choose otherwise?” Many times I have posed this question to the disembodied voice that despite hesitation is certain of the gravity of its utterance.

At twenty, as I ruffled the tanned pages of Good Morning, Midnight—my first foray into Rhysian melancholy—I was troubled. Later I read After Leaving Mr MacKenzie and Quartet, still later Wide Sargasso Sea, but all did not assuage the disquiet. Not even the playful short stories or the posthumous Smile Please. Sasha, Julia, Marya, and Antoinette could do much but they would not. Jean Rhys, unlike her women, would give up the world for the pursuit of happiness but she could not. So she wrote.

The pivot of Rhys’s novellas is the unmoving lack of drive. No activism; ac—. My search for some sense of grassroots feminism, nevermind transgressions and drama, or an erg of energy in the women’s lives, ended on the first few pages of each book. Too many rooms and hotels; too many women depressed. Story after story; stasis after stasis. Yet, paradoxically, anything sustained, including lack and inertia, necessitates an effort to keep up, to stay in the state of non-drive. Repetition isn’t a cop-out; it is a high form of repartee. In that was action.

Rhys would always say “I” when referring to her characters. She is all of them, she once admitted in a conversation with Mary Cantwell. In writing them, she tried to write about herself once more, twice, thrice. But — alas! — the tunnels bore into the inevitable end. The more she wrote, the more she was unhappy. Circles; cycles of unhappiness. Unwarranted, but action nonetheless.

I asked too, “Why does happiness diminish the impulse to write?” For Rhys, being happy and writing are mutually exclusive. One writes not in peace times, happy times. She didn’t. She wouldn’t. “I’ve never been happy,” she said. So she wrote incessantly and, I think, unconditionally since the very condition for not writing, that being happiness—“I’d rather be happy than write”—is off the table.

Reading Rhys, I was rather selfishly glad that she kept on writing, and by implication glad that she was not happy, as you reader would too if you encounter her works.

What I could not understand back then when I was twenty and what I now understand is happiness is a choice. If she could have her life all over again, Rhys would choose to be happy. Because one can choose to be happy. But writing, writing is not a choice. One has to write. One must write. Rhys had to write. She couldn’t choose not to—the hypothetical ifs flutter away...the ellipses ramble on....

I imagine many decades from now if God permits, I would say the same, “I’d rather be happy than write,” knowing very well that to write is never a choice, as to be born and live are not mine choices. WC