Director’s Note

Robin Hemley

We began The Hawker a couple of years ago to get the word out about the many writing centered activities the Writers’ Centre engages in all around campus. The Writers’ Centre is unique as a writing centre in that it’s a combination of a traditional academic writing centre and a literary centre. Rather than cutting off different modes of writing from one another, we seek to show how they can compliment one another. We at the Writers’ Centre are always challenging ourselves to add new programs and to find new approaches to making writing a core part of Yale-NUS. To that end, we are going to pilot a program of public speaking to our services. In the future, not only will you be able to meet with staff about your writing but we’ll try to assist you with your spoken assignments, such as class presentations and other types of spoken word events.

We also are initiating a campus wide competition to seek out the most exemplary essays in various disciplines. Each Hawker we will highlight a different kind of essay, nominated by one of your profs. The prof nominating the essay and the author of the winning essay will each receive a $25 gift certificate to Books, Actually. Our first competition will have a deadline of November 1st and will be for a Freshman paper in any of the Common Curriculum courses. The winning essay, or a portion of it depending on length, will be published in a future edition of The Hawker and will be available online on our website. Already in this issue we have several pieces of student writing from students who earned fellowships to go to Iowa and Greece.

In addition, we’re adding a new writing course next term that we’re excited about: Daily Themes. This is the legendary writing course that’s been taught at Yale for many years. Students in the class commit to writing an essay of 300 – 500 words a day, five days a week, on topics chosen by the instructor. Entrance to the course is by portfolio submission and will be restricted to twelve lucky students. The course will be taught on its inaugural run by Lawrence Ypil. Continued on p. 2
By the end of sophomore year, I had declared my major in what seems to many the opposite of what the humanities could offer: Physical Sciences. Even though I began my journey at Yale-NUS with excitement to be given time to explore Literature, it was not what would ultimately become my major. Thence began the journey into long hours in the laboratory, and even longer hours writing reports and detailed explanations of scientific concepts that I applied in analysis. It also prompted my reflections on writing— which has so often been the vehicle for deep thinking, synthesizing, and investigating. My takeaways from writing in the humanities in the common curriculum, however, have remained more than a matter of wetting my fingertips in those fields. These takeaways instead revealed how the granular ideas we try to understand in every academic discipline are akin to metaphors for better understanding a larger picture.

The basis of effective scientific writing revealed itself to me as scarcely different from what is done in the humanities— it is building and making sense of conclusions from evidence that required analysis through precise and cogent writing. The metaphor of working with textual evidence and examples in the sciences, is dealing with raw data obtained from experiments or numbers that came from a particular problem. Similar to fleshing out the significance of a literary device in *The Odyssey*, the significance of data, numbers, or scientific/ mathematical concept requires contextualisation, analysis, and elaboration. Why am I picking out this data for use in the first place, where does it come from? Why is this wavelength of light particular on my spectrum? Why is there literary value to the olive tree in *Odysseus*? Then, what larger themes related to the topic at hand must be employed to think about how the numbers, or olive trees, fit in? And finally, how does that analysis help you make a transition to invoking the overall objective/argument? How does my spectrum constructively support the reaction mechanism I am proposing? How does the olive tree relate to characterisation in the epic? Aside from switching gears in vocabulary, the process of writing— and thus guided thinking— remains deeply concerned with careful analysis of evidence- or metaphors- to understand a larger issue.

The process of writing for me, then, has always been the act of weaving together different threads of thinking that help build up an understanding from atomic pieces of information. Writing in the sciences and a close appreciation for the tools found in the common curriculum to think across borders have helped transform my writing into a tool for digging into any kind of evidence presented in each academic discipline, from physics to comparative literature and anywhere in between.

**Metaphors of Writing**

*From Common Curriculum to Writing in the Sciences*

*by Peer Tutor Jolene Lum*

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**Director’s Note Continued**

As always, we have a full and varied lineup of great readings over the year. Our kickoff reading and welcome back reception was on August 28th, and featured the staff of The Writers’ Centre. Our staff writes a lot. If you are interested in the wide variety of projects they are working on, reach out to them! We followed with readings by poets Rodrigo de la Peña Jr. and Grace Chia. Next we have essayist-journalist Jen Percy and poet Jason Wee at 7:30 pm in Elm Common Lounge, followed by a reception in the Writers’ Centre. This will be on October 11th. Jen Percy will lead a workshop on how to honestly tell the stories of others in non-fiction writing. Jason Wee will lead a workshop on how poetry can be a testimony to witness and remembrance. More details about these workshops will be sent later in October, so keep checking your email and look for our posters in the lifts.

Finally, we have some new faces at The Writers’ Centre, our new Program Manager, Jenika Kaul and our new DF Associate, Detmer Kremer. And we’re delighted that Prof Heidi Stalla has returned after a productive sabbatical.

Welcome to the new academic year and the full spectrum of events and services provided for you by The Writers’ Centre. WC
The letter is not yours, nor mine. Not even Time’s. The Post? Is it Love’s, adjectivally speaking?

Nay. It is its own, but an own without being owned by itself. The letter has no owner, yet. What is this that speaks and breathes, that cuts and binds, seals and exudes, but cannot be defined? Perhaps the moment en passant may be re-lived—think interval, not instant—but it may never be repeated. (Re-posting is a twenty-first century invention.)

Though in my hands, it is not itself. I feel its edges, the marks on the page, creases on the brown envelope, the sticky residue of glue—saliva, might it be? But no, no letter; I cannot say what it looks like. I see only the hand that first wrote, the lips that first spoke, the tongue that first thrust itself, forcing feelings to be uttered! As if I am only catching up, I am always catching up. I am a whole step too slow; the letter is a shadow, surrogate, selling short the spectre from my past. But that’s not it, is it? For ghosts I can deal with. But deity? I have made something saintly out of shite. Now the presence is not spectral; an idol god from Gath is in the room. Where’s the sling and stone? Woman cannot fight a god like that. No, not with a pen.

The letter is an idealised form; love at its weakest, also its grandest. It is bridge and distance. It tells me that I am loved; it tells me that my love is not with me. I think of the hand moving across the page, fingers clasping the pen, fingers still clasping when nothing is written. The letter grazes me and I am hurt. There is no healing, for the cure that is the blade cannot be grasped. WC

Love letters from ‘once upon a time’ outlast any they convey. Zelda Fitzgerald confesses to F. Scott Fitzgerald, “I love you anyway even if there isn’t me or any love or even any life – I love you”; a statement proven only true when we comb through letters between Tudor king, Henry VIII and the wife he’d later behead, Anne Boleyn.

Letters are evidence, like dinosaur bones we excavate and drape with the appropriate muscle and flesh of our technology and imagination. Here, it is precisely language we hold to create the myth of their love. Letters are no longer just symbols of love, though they might have been between sender and receiver – but to the ‘archeologist’, these letters are coffins, tombs, Taj Mahal’s for any Roadside Romeo who doesn’t have the budget of a Shah but has access to pig’s blood and a spare bit of parchment.

For Ludwig, Stefan Zweig’s hero in Journey into the Past, “feverishly written letters” telling of his daily life in the Mexican mines are the only way to survive the long-distance relationship with his beloved in Europe. Even the mundane, he must pen to her to feel she is with him, or, to feel his life merges with hers. From her words, he imagines her hand first, then the shoulder, then, up to the face and lips and a quiver – lips in love are always quivering. Perhaps, in this way, the letter eventually first dilutes and then, replaces the love/lover itself. So, that when World War I halts all of their exchanges indefinitely, he marries another woman. Their letters, though, he preserves. And so does she – like the bedroom, where they shared their first kiss.

But the contemporary love letter lasts only as long as the sender’s and receiver’s statuses read ‘in a relationship’. Otherwise, click a button and it’s deleted. As if the button was stitched right onto the heart; a button to turn on, the same to turn off. The ‘I love you’ plus kiss emoji is dragged into a virtual trash. Where love once failed and yet was buried still in these archived confessions, love is now deleted, and not even a set of footprints exist to show these two individuals were ever standing together. WC
Dear Larry

by Lawrence Ypil

Dear Larry,

The classics generally bore me. Shakespeare does not stir any emotions for me and I can’t stand the Beatles. I found many other artists that do excite me and make me want to continue to read and listen and see. I can recognise academic significance, but to me they seem emotionally vacant and often when I share that opinion I receive a wave of outcries and arguments. Can I be a scholar and artist if what are seen as masterpieces do nothing but tire me? Should I feign admiration?

Sincerely,
A confused critic

Dear Confused Critic,

Feigning admiration seems like the last recourse anyone should take. It is like loving something for the sake of loving something because everyone else has told you so. Such are the loves that are made on a sense of duty and security, made on behalf on feeling “alright, alright”, since everyone else loves it so.

Pleasure, however, demands its own idiosyncrasies--- this and only this. This and nothing or no one else. For what other reason do we say that we are moved by a story, a shape, if not that a scene, its texture speaks to us (and us alone)? Not on such shared notions of the canonical loves of shared admiration through the centuries will such real pleasures be found.

Let me say that it is perfectly alright, entirely fine that you do not love the classics, that they seem to give you more pain than pleasure. The canon is a product of a particular cultural sense of what any civilized citizen needs. In effect, this list of “must-reads” are less universal than they are contingent on politics and power. For some of us who belong to segments of culture that belong outside of these centers of cultural power, this encounter with the cannon can be fraught with a sense of coercion, resistance, apathy, yes, exhaustion.

Exhaustion, perhaps is a good place to start as a critic. Under the tired lids of a dozing off, the thick complete William on our chests, maybe that is where the potential for engagement lies. What lines stay in spite of all that seems forgettable? Which scenes linger, if not in irritation? Pleasure’s a good place to start for a criticism, but it isn’t the only one,

Larry

Hi, I’m Jenika Kaul, the new Programme Manager at the Writers’ Centre.

Hi! I’m Detmer Kremer, and I am the new Dean’s Fellow at the Writer’s Centre! I am originally from the Netherlands, and studied anthropology at Bates College in the United States. After that I worked in community outreach as a Quaker Voluntary Service fellow at Atlanta Habitat for Humanity. I write short stories, fiction, creative non-fiction, and essays. I am also passionate about speaking and oral narratives, and am excited to bring speaking support and speaking events to the Writer’s Centre. Naturally, I like to read and write for most of my free time, and I love to travel; while I am in Singapore I especially hope to visit Sulawesi and Luang Prabang. I am excited to start my work here and look forward to writing and speaking together! WC
I went into the workshops with no expectations; several schoolmates who had gone for previous iterations of the Iowa Summer Writing Festival had shared their experiences with me, but I strove to make this experience new and unique, so I went in with an open mind, expecting nothing. It turned out to be a great experience that would’ve exceeded any expectation. My workshop classmates were incredibly kind while offering good critique, and my workshop instructors were both extremely well-versed in the art of novel-writing. I took two week-long workshops, and after the first day of the first workshop, I found myself full of anxiety, as all my workshop mates had written at least one full first draft of their novels. The program description made no mention of needing to have written a full draft, so I was certainly not expecting to find myself in this situation. Fortunately, the instructor did not actually need us to have written full first drafts, and I was actually able to produce a lot of new material during that week. One of the things I was not expecting was to add a character to my novel, and this caused massive changes to be made to the ideas I had for my novel (as well as the chapters in my existing draft). Fortunately, the workshop was so thought-provoking and generative that I was able to come up with many ideas despite the additional character. Overall, my workshop experience was extremely fruitful and very enjoyable. Even though I was the only Asian person in both workshops, there was no difficulty in getting my classmates to understand where I was coming from. As a matter of fact, all of them were extremely interested in the cultural background that my stories were set in. What was interesting was that a large number of them had known enough of the Philippines to tell me that certain parts of the story verged on over-explaining, and it felt as though they were even more familiar with certain cultural references than Singaporeans are, and that was a very pleasant surprise. I highly recommend the Iowa Summer Writing Festival to any budding writers; it was a very positive experience, and both of my workshops gave me an immense variety of ways of thinking about my novel-in-progress.

Thoughts on Spending Time in Greece

‘Wherever I go, Greece wounds me.’ – Giorgos Seferis

This means to live and wrestle with one’s identity as a poet in a remote location, with a small community of writers, even if this identity has, for the most part, felt like borrowed feathers shielding a small, vulnerable heart. This means to open up this very heart, have it teased and slapped by the moods of the Aegean whenever I sat down to write at the guesthouse each day. Have it torn apart by the charred pines that valiantly shielded our daily trek to the shore, even after the forest fire last September made a once lush summer turn to bare fall. Scar and heal at the sight of baby pines poking out from the soot and ash coating the forest grounds, each no taller my left thumb.

This means to deal with one’s sense of foreignness, where the people beside you knew about, and empathized with you about as much as the stone and marble at the ancient ruins, a temple once dedicated to Castor and Pollux now scarred with age. Meaning they were always there for you, watching over you when you sailed on the Aegean for the first time, for every single time, as you watched the rise, then fall of the waves, breaking the sunlight into shards of the brightest pearl imaginable.

This means learning they were there for you, when you learnt to wait for shards to fall into your poems at their own time, to forgive your words and try again. They were there, when you first heard your writing breathe, a pained rise, then fall. When you cried to let people into your words, to trust again.

This means they taught you. They taught me. To trust myself to be able to weave words together with meaning, to have the patience to unpick the seams to start over again. WC
My experience in Iowa City has gifted me with many things. I received an incredible writing community, room to read and space to grow. The first week of workshops with my instructor, Robyn Schiff, has possibly been one of the most transformative weeks in my short experience as an amateur poet. The workshop was an all-female workshop, where we discussed topics that were unique to the female experience. I found myself surrounded by the intensity of the American lyric, immersed in verses and stanzas audacious in both content and form.

Amidst everything, I found myself learning what it means to be a woman, and what it means to be empowered as a woman. I am on the brink of adulthood, I think, and everything is coming to me at an incredible speed. That week, I was listening to conversations about marriage, miscarriage and divorce. That week I read a poem on menstruation aloud. That week the ladies in my class, who have become friends, listened keenly to my trembling voice as I read poem after poem about my family. Iowa gets extremely dark after 9pm, and I often find myself brisk walking through the streets, afraid that as a young Asian girl, I would be the victim of kidnap, or rape. These fears, though silly, are certainly not unfounded. I found myself becoming incredibly aware of my limitations as a woman. The three other writing fellows I was blessed to be in Iowa with were men—they could easily get home after dark, or speak confidently about traversing New York City without having to fear, or take a jog in the neighbourhood at a strange hour. But as I spoke of my womanhood in the afternoon, the daily walks home became less of a race against the dark. I slowly learned to let go of my fear a little, and to breathe easy. I even saw fireflies for the first time.

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Pencil down water called nero. It melts on your tongue into dissolved lead, catching on the edge of your throat, barbed like bones in yesterday's fish soup. The fish melts in your mouth but the words do not, a stubborn tartness stinging up your throat that you try to wash down with water reeking of lead. You hear the ring of your phone at home, now accompanied by lemon, not milk that wafts from fish soup into your room; it is not yours to answer. So you sit still, arms outstretched – the next wave embraces you with a slap.

How to Speak in Greek
by Peer Tutor Chrystal Ho

1. in the first two months, a statistics class experimented with eruption, struggled to grasp time in-between. a sequence of numbers and the volcano became palpable in programme. shortcuts learned. on every screen emerged a vector of time.

2. my ahma* does not know how to reply my texts. she holds the blue nokia an arms length away and clicks around, fumbles carelessly. a string of unrecognizable alphabets. there are times that she misplaces the phone, a splinter in her room at the basement of a church building. she can leave it untouched for days. most times she forgets how to say without speaking.

3. the next time I visit my ahma, I try to show her the correct buttons. we sit on the edge of the bed as I guide her thumbs. she stares intently before echoing the movement of my hands.

4. a month later, an announcement of the 2G network's expiration date.

5. the numbers we picked out only began to exist in the spaces. not steady or absolute. not a first step down the stairs. not the warning before the tornado. it arrived from the underground and was thrown about.

6. is your heart not the same way? a product of trial and error, consequence of chaos? scavenger of broken things while mynahs continue their business?

7. in speaking about the continuum of novels: the lecturer tells a greying class that the best stories are not laboured, but arrived at from experience. in the brief silence afterward she hears the scribbling nod of pen.

8. with my ahma I discovered the intimacy of distance. she cooked the dishes, I made the bed. dinner prayers to end with a request for preservation. over the meal we held conversations on grand themes: through the passing of steamed pomfret, the request for more rice.

9. the undergraduates struggled through dialect class. it was difficult for them to learn a language unwritten, learned by muscle memory. the instructor grew keenly aware of the repetiton of sound, the desire for instant proficiency, but it was insufficient. it was a month until they visited an old folks home. the students spoke full phrases while clutching paper and pen. the instructor drew a breath. her final advice: love can be simple, without language. as easy as the touching of hands.

10. do we always need the trail of breadcrumbs to tell us where, who we are? to instruct its search party how to live?

11. and how many stories have we lost in our unmaking?

12. of course you cannot go back. WC

*Ihuma: grandmother in Mandarin

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Generation
by Jasmine Goh

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Iowa Reflections Part II
by Jasmine Goh

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How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality and the Fight for the Neighborhood: Peter Moskovits (Nation Books): An incredible and accessible read that delves into the processes of how our cities are being redefined. By focusing on New Orleans, Detroit, San Francisco, and New York City, Moskovits is able to unearth the depth of American gentrification while still remaining relevant to non-American cities. He brilliantly describes how gentrification is an intentional process resulting in a changing purpose of cities; rather than being a place where a diverse group of people can live, the city becomes a revenue-centered corporation. Moskovits not only explains why this is harmful to all communities (including privileged ones) but also provides tools to remEDIATE this process.

War Dances: Sherman Alexie (Grove Press): A honest and heartfelt collection of short stories and poetry which examines contemporary Indigenous experiences in the United States, and connects those experiences to other conversations surrounding race and gender. The stories and poems effectively create a complex understanding of identity and agency, and with Alexie’s humor, the lessons stick. The combination of poetry and prose provides varied storytelling and allows for Alexie’s voice to capture a wide range of perspectives.

Beauty is a Wound: Eka Kurniawan (New Directions): A novel of epic proportions in which a prostitute rises from the grave after having been dead for decades to ensure the safety of her family. Set in the fictional Indonesian town of Halimunda, this story narrates not only the supernatural, but also the changing ideologies and times of a colonial and post-colonial Indonesia. Weaving together Japanese camps, communist uprisings, and tragic heartbreak, Kurniawan presents a cast of women that defy expectations and follow unexpected paths towards a heartbreaking end. A long story that deserves your attention.

This issue features work by Students who participated in the Writing Fellowship Programme Sponsored by CIPE and The Writers’ Centre. From nine possible creative writing workshops, they chose to study in Iowa and Greece.

Chrystal Ho
Jasmine Goh
Justin Ong
Paul Jerusalem

Iowa Reflections Part III
by Justin Ong

Upon my arrival at the Iowa Summer Writing Festival, I was immediately hit by a strange realisation: that all the people here were in some extent or another, writers. This had never happened to me before, being a place that lived and breathed writing. Singapore has endowed mw with my fair share of opportunity, but never at this scale. On both my workshops I was confronted with different truths. First there was the truth that diversity existed in this world; where my first workshop had a Nigerian and two Chinese nationals. The stories were as foreign as they were fascinating and made me wonder if Singapore had the same potential to enchant as well.

The second thing I realised was that identity was a complicated process; and my second workshop taught me this; with a room of older participants that brought with them their own histories that they wanted to synthesise in a novel. It made me think: just what could Singapore offer beyond the cursory questions of exactly where it was and how clean/safe it was. What value did this small country have to a wider world? I think about all the things that I could do to better show these writers what Singapore was about. Long after I returned, I am still trying. I don’t think I’ll fully succeed, but when I think back at how lost I was and how badly I wanted my voice to be heard, I don’t think I’ll ever
For me, there is nothing like being in a new place to inspire the drive to write. There's new foods to taste, new perspectives to consider, and a new home to create. My senses become more aware. Nostalgia shifts my memories. It is exhilarating and exhausting, raw and rewarding, and rarely dull. Writing is a way to express these emotions and to share my experience with friends and family who are far.

While Singapore isn't exactly new to me, I'm rediscovering it for the second time. Here are five places in Singapore that always make me want to grab a pen and paper:

1. Fort Canning: A high patch of green in the middle of the city centre where the old trees hold their ground against the skyline and remind me that Singapore once was a jungle. Don't forget to look up and see the birds that find sanctuary here.

2. Little India: The papaya vendor at Tekka Market who chooses your fruit depending on when you want it to be ripe. The Hindu temple with its dressed-up idols well-worn by hands of the devoted. People crossing the road anywhere they please. Dosas and appams as delicious as their counterparts in South India.


4. Palau Ubin: Mangroves swarming with fiddler crabs. Paved and shaded paths perfect for a cycle ride. And a lesson learned in public holiday adventures: what is intended as an escape from the city can actually be a lesson in queuing – at the ferry terminal, to rent a cycle, to eat prawns, and to return home.

5. The bus: Preferably the front seat on the second floor of a double decker, winding through neighborhoods on an almost-always non-linear route. A glimpse into daily life outside of the expat bubble, both on and off the bus.

What places in Singapore inspire you to write? Let us know with an email to writers.centre@yale-nus.edu.sg. WC

Calling All Writers (students/staff/faculty)

Did you finish reading this issue feeling inspired? Did you string words together into a beautiful poem? Or write a heartbreaking short story? Send us your work and see it in the next Hawker!

Please email all submissions to writers.centre@yale-nus.edu.sg and make “Hawker submission” the subject.