On Being Ignored

by Detmer Kremer

“The best thing you can do is just to ignore me,” Betty Who sings as a declaration of a broken heart and maybe reflecting on her own stage name. It might be unexpected advice from someone who is leaving, and this piece of writing should be considered a goodbye. I care deeply about you all, and this community, and hope we will not ignore one another as we move to different places, be that jobs, schools, or class years. Neither is my call to be ignored an ask for false modesty. I want to applaud the students who submitted their works, and congratulate the ones who earned literary awards, and thank them for not letting their work to be ignored. Additionally, certain voices currently speaking within and outside of academia have been ignored for far too long. At this point, you might be skeptical. Why would anyone, including myself, want to be ignored?

If you do not yet know this about me, social justice is something I care deeply about and permeates everything I do. In that sense, being ignored by an oppressive system of power can provide you with the necessary breathing space to enact change both personally and communally. Being ignored means no one is harassing you and allows you to go about your day peacefully and purposefully. As a queer person, sometimes through being ignored I find refuge from potential violence. Being ignored means you are not detected. Being ignored means that those in power want to silence you by not paying you any attention but you pay them no mind and keep on keeping on. Sometimes being ignored means you are doing something right. Being ignored means you try not to be a savior, and almost always no one needs a savior. Batman is outdated, and not just because of Ben Affleck’s portrayal of him. I am not saying being ignored is the only way of being active, or that it is easy, or always beneficial. Rather I want you to reexamine what it means and how we can understand ourselves through a potential invisibility. Recognition is important, but never let that define all your worth, because you are so worthy. Being ignored can be both a blessing and a curse, and I ask you to carry that complexity with you. Put a funky beat on it, and dance away – it should not matter whether anyone is watching.
When they left the MRT station, Kris almost dashed in her excitement, impeded only by the sea of people walking along Orchard Road in waves – to Tang Plaza, to Lucky Plaza, to Scotts Square, to the MRT station. It took finesse to be able to navigate through the crowd faster than the waves into which every single person seemed to converge, forming monolithic wholes. The same could be said of the noise, as each person's chattering coagulated into walls of sound. Corazon hated crowds, but she was grateful that the sheer volume of people in Orchard Road on a Sunday evening meant that Kris wasn't able to get too far from her, and that she did not have to embarrass herself shouting for Kris to stop running. Slowly catching up with Kris, Corazon grabbed her hand as the traffic enforcer's whistle cleaved through the cacophony, and waited as he blew the whistle again and retracted his raised hands, and the parted sea of people flowed back into the crossing.

“What are you buying, Mama?”
“Just some chocolates.”
“For Valentine's Day? Does Mama have a new boyfriend?”
“Susmaryosep, don't talk nonsense, God is listening. I'm sending a box back to Binangonan.”
“What is Binanananonan?”
“Binangonan. Mama's hometown. Your grandparents and uncles and aunts are from there also.”
“Why are you always sending boxes back to Binaonan?”
“When you grow up you'll know. We cannot forget about where we came from, and when you grow up and move to the United States, you also cannot forget Mama.”

Corazon squeezed Kris' hand.

“Then why don't you go back to Binaonan?”
Corazon clicked her tongue. “Don't forget does not mean you have to go back. When you go somewhere better, don't feel sorry for being in a better place, because you worked hard for it. Just don't leave them behind. That's why Mama sends money and boxes back from time to time. Mama can't go back so often but at least Mama still helps her family.”

They squeezed up a flight of side stairs to the mezzanine level, where the discount chocolate store was. Kris jumped in glee as Corazon, seizing the opportunity for her daughter to practice her math, gave her nearly free reign in choosing chocolates as long as it all fit into a hundred dollars. When they were done with shopping for chocolates, Corazon figured that she might as well remit money there since the remittance fee was lower than at other remittance agencies that she usually went to in order to avoid Lucky Plaza.

“What does Binanananonan mean?”
“Bi-nango-nan,” Corazon corrected her, unable to recall the answer immediately. “Why do you have so many questions?”
“On Friday we learnt in school that Katong means a type of sea turtle, because Katong used to be where the beach was until they extended the beach further out so that they can build more buildings.”
“I wonder if the turtles were ever able to find their way home after the beach got pushed further out into sea.”
Now she remembered. “To bangon means to rise, or to wake up from a state of rest. So Binangonan means something like, a place where someone woke up from a state of rest.”
“Who was sleeping?”
Corazon waited for Kris to take her left hand. “No one. It's just a name.”
“How can anything be named just like that, for fun?”
“That's just the way things are, you don't need to question it so much. Maybe because the Sun looks like it is rising from Binangonan when you look to the east from Manila across the lake.”

Corazon pulled Kris away from the escalator going up to Kabayan. Corazon steeled her glare at Kris as the latter opened her mouth to protest, stopping herself just in time to shorten her “I” to an “ah-,” lest her pocket money get docked again.

“Which province is Tita Rena from?”
“Cavite.”
“What does Cavite mean?”
“I don't know.” WC
No, mother, the water isn’t always
as blue as the picture. Those are bad days
with secrets to hide beneath the jewels.

On good days the water is honest, baring
its teeth, rocks slathered in algae so soapy
they need a good scrubbing. I sit half
submerged, reaching out to the translucent
fish that will not swim into my cupped hands.

I will never blend into the rocks here.

Some days I crave the wet from home,
the clouds that kiss our faces with warm licks
of sweat. I step into the water scented
with roasted meat from the gyro stand.

But the sky sends down warm rays to form
cracked tortoiseshells mapping the seafloor.
So I step. The rocks snap at my feet. At least
the seas here are also flavoured with salt.
I glanced out of the window above the kitchen sink, my medication in one hand, a glass of water in the other. The garden, fresh with morning dew, wallowed in the sunrise that surfaced behind the remnants of last night's fog. A burnt orange glow blazed through the needles on the pine trees outside and illuminated the kitchen. It was one of those dazzling days when autumn decided to show off. Somehow, it reminded me of how the October sun would shine through the forests back at home.

I reached out for the metal clasp on the window to let the crisp breeze into the stuffy room. Our house resided on a tiny, but steep, hill located in the wreath of suburbs that surrounded Stockholm. From the hill, I could trace the entire neighbourhood unearthing from the ground below. At this hour, the air was still quiet, save for the faint rattle of the city train clattering against the tracks in the distance.

Then, as I withdrew from the view, I popped the pill into my mouth and inhaled the water.

Behind me, my husband entered the kitchen, breathless from his walk up and down the hill to our mailbox which lined the main road. He whacked the morning post on the wooden table.

"You're gonna catch a cold if you keep opening the windows like that," he rumbled with his deep morning voice as he snuck up behind me, scooped me up in a tight embrace, and grazed his lips against the curve of my neck. The tip of his nose felt cold against my skin. My insides fluttered. "A letter arrived. It's time for your first biannual health check-up."

"Oh."

"It's in three days. Don't forget."

I nodded and wriggled out of his grasp.

“What do you want for breakfast today?” I said.

“Surprise me.” He sat down at the table.

Six months earlier, I would have cooked a hot bowl of oatmeal to fill my husband's belly before a busy day at work. Instead, I prepared a cup of coffee and looked for something easy. Karl didn't know, but I had dreaded the biannual health check-up for half a year. As I placed a box of store-bought muesli and a jug of low-fat milk in front of him, I caught sight of the slip from the Public Health Services on the table, and though the letter was for me, it was addressed to him. WC
JOHN: You know, it may not have been your race.
RITA: C'mon, back to this?
JOHN: I've said it before, it may have just been your qualifications.
RITA: I'm plenty qualified.
JOHN: Everybody's having trouble getting a job.
RITA: It's not just the job.
JOHN: I know. But I know it stung. You had your goals, but you know, goals can change, to accommodate... RITA: Reality?
JOHN: ... Yeah.
RITA: It shouldn't be that way, it shouldn't be a reality.
JOHN: Yeah, but sometimes it is. And we deal with it.
RITA: I don't think you really get it, John.
JOHN: I've been rejected plenty, Rita, sometimes by you-
RITA: It's not as simple as updating a resume.
JOHN: Sure it is!
RITA: It's not.
Pause.
RITA: I felt like I was dressed in cardboard, I'd ironed my clothes so stiff and I barely slept. I spent all night reading their company bio so I could tell them I could fit into their bullshit philosophy about tailoring a unique and expedient strategy to combat any problem blah blah blah. I'd put so much concealer to cover my eye bags, but then it was so visible, I washed it all off and went with nothing.
JOHN: I'm sure you looked great.
RITA: (Ignoring) I go in for the interview, and it's going amazing. I'm knocking the questions out of the park, and my interviewer is laughing when I joke, and I'm killing it. I am fucking killing it. And then he asks me... “Do you speak Mandarin?”
JOHN: ... And?
RITA: What? No. What?
JOHN: So when what's the big deal? RITA: Every bit of our courts are in English. Verdicts, statements, every law, English. Why would it matter if I spoke Mandarin?
JOHN: Maybe they've got clients in the region?
RITA: They were family law specialists.
JOHN: Clients in the region could have families.
RITA: I answered him, I told him, not really. But I've got some experience, growing up in Singapore, but nothing more than casual greetings.
JOHN: Bullshit.
RITA: It's a job interview. Of course I lied. I asked him if that's a problem. He said, well, no, not really. Just that most of my colleagues would be Chinese and a lot of the office talk is in Mandarin. (Pause) I didn't get the job.
JOHN: It may not have been because of that. It could have been-
RITA: I worked my ass off in law, John. Constant internships, impossible GPA, and I mean impossible, no social life-
JOHN: Maybe that was why. (RITA glares at him) Okay. Okay. Then why don't you learn Chinese? If that's the problem.
RITA: Because I shouldn't have to, John. I shouldn't have to learn Chinese to be Singaporean. I shouldn't feel like an outsider despite speaking two of our four official languages.
JOHN: I'm sure there are other firms.
RITA: You're missing the point.
JOHN: I think I am! Because I don't get why you're going to change your entire race just cause one guy expected you to speak Mandarin.
RITA: It's a statement.
JOHN: A statement on what?
RITA: On this country. On what it takes to succeed. We talk about meritocracy this, meritocracy that. But merit is shit. It's a lie. We can't just say it's merit. We can't. Cause that's not what it is. Merit is ignoring that every single minority in this country is fighting their own race to make sure they show they have merit. It's ignoring that I had to get up at 5am to squeeze in some studying because most of my teachers would be busy when I wanted to meet them, busy teaching the next LKY or LHL. It's ignoring the fact that I was treated like a gone case until I got into law, and even then I became the exception. I wasn't the rule. Clearly I wasn't like the rest of them, I was different, because I made it. I made it because I fought my own people, to become one of them. Malay in colour, Chinese in spirit. You know how fucked that is? WC

Pompeii Remembered
by Sidarth Praveen '21

Rage, such rage has never been witnessed hitherto
Emanating from the red, flaming specter, Vulcan's pride:
Mount Vesuvius. Fiery, ashen, ghastly blood of his will flow and
End us all it will for Clouds of death have overtaken Apollo's ride.
Mighty is the Roman Empire. Mighty is Pompeii, a heaven on earth.
But the hell raining down on it is mightier. To Morta this city will belong
End us the gods may but our greatness will not be forgotten in their mirth
Raindrops of fire, Sounds of burning, crying, amalgamate into a melancholy song

Unsure I am about what to do now that I shall die. So, I merely write. And you, reader
Swear, upon going back and reading the first letter of every line of this poem, that you will –
The Humanities are Essential
by Judith Huang

I must study politics and war, that our sons may have the liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. Our sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain.
- John Adams

When my parents were at school, Lee Kwan Yew declared that the country needed engineers. In a perfect demonstration of overeager compliance, the best and the brightest of that generation rushed en masse to study engineering. Nobody thought it was a good idea to study the arts and humanities if they could qualify for something “better” – that is courses that were harder to get into. In fact I know of a couple of people who were actually scolded for attempting to enroll in arts courses when they qualified for science or engineering. The same structure of social engineering was in place when I was at school. If your grades were good, you went into the science stream – triple science was the best, of course. The higher cut-off marks for Science than Arts implied that Arts was the soft option – where you'd find the bottom of the barrel. Why would you go there on purpose? And so, for at least two generations, we have been signaling that the arts and humanities (except perhaps Economics) are not important. When I declared my intention to be an English major when entering university, relatives and acquaintances always asked, “What are you going to do with that, teach?” As though the only conceivable use for a literature degree would be to create more literature students in an endless solipsistic loop. But the humanities – particularly the most “useless”, “decorative”, “soft” ones like poetry, music or philosophy, are precisely the most essential, particularly as our nation comes of age. And we, the third generation out of poverty, are best placed to study precisely these subjects. Because the humanities are what makes us human. In an increasingly diverse but polarized world, we are more than ever in need of empathy – empathy that may come in seeing through the eyes of a protagonist of a different race, culture or religion from us in a novel, a short story, a film. In a world rocked by increasing religious fundamentalism and literalism, the ability to close-read texts and understand genre, interrogate purpose and point of view, and put texts in context is about as urgent a need as any other – and are essential skills honed in a literature or history class. As our island state welcomes more and more people of different backgrounds and identities to our shores, we need people who can grapple with ambiguity and complexity, who can understand cultural nuances and broader sociological patterns, not just to craft policy, but also to simply be a more tolerant and welcoming neighbor. And it is precisely the humanities that teach us to be comfortable with complexity and ambiguity. And, as science and technology change the way we interact and relate at a break-neck pace, giving us ever-more power over our environment and other species, and even our definitions of what may be a sentient intelligence, we need now more than ever a strong moral compass and a good set of ethics, thus rendering the study of philosophy – so often derided as “pointless” or “useless” – incredibly vital and useful. And let us not forget Beauty. We should not study the arts and humanities merely because they are useful, but also because they represent some of the highest pinnacles of human endeavor. They tell us about our dearest wishes, our highest aspirations, our longings for a better world. They tell us about ourselves. In the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, “what is essential is invisible to the eye”. The humanities are the study of the essential. So, please, let’s reassess how we view the arts and humanities – not as the soft option for students who can’t make it into anything else, but as absolutely essential, to both ourselves as individuals in our search for meaning, goodness and the good life, and also for our nation. It is no coincidence that the Singapore of my parents’ generation, run by engineers, and of my generation, run by economists, has been often derided as “soulless”. Let's put the soul back into Singapore, and encourage the study of those things which make us most human. WC
Is Organ Trading

by Al Lim ’19, honourable mention - poetry

“first class urban passengers are busily building rescue vessels while ecological refugees drown...”
–Kaika and Sywngedouw’s “Radical urban political-ecological imaginaries” (2014)

Existing in the interstice of blue-green networks is resilience-building, meaning an ecological fetishism or an ontology of aesthetics, meaning a one-stop renal clinic with state-of-the-art unimodal accretion. Cyborgs are bounded up in a depoliticized fashion—techno-managerial pursuits that can be identified in revolutionary discourse. Invent, transform and innovate while sutures fail to cover crisis tendencies; failure to regulate is structured into this epoch like currency, like advancement of ideologies, unlike the expense hiding between dichotomies an organ that is an organ and Organ is M-C Question on whether to “save a life” is more than a waiting list or a game of competition. To edge one out is to feel the scalpel’s non-human human edge, constructs for the built/unbuilt environment of skin. One gets cash. The other, life. This is the ultimate capital gain. Acrid smell lingers on the thin layer of dust covering sheets of the pacemaker enforcing regularity—surveillance. A dialectic cannot purchase the cure for dialysis. In fall, we all know that leaves discolor.

From The Nightstand of Detmer Kremer

No One is Here Except All of Us by Ramona Ausubel (Riverhead Books): When imminent danger is encroaching, the Jewish residents of Zalischik in 1942 stay put and create a brand new world in order to remain safe and together. Ausubel weaves together what is imagined and what is inevitable seamlessly to create a heartbreaking tale of the power of dreams and community. Although her young characters sometimes sound too much like poetic oracles for their age, her innovative story is a testimony to resilience and survival. The story cradles your heart and will occasionally let it be warmed by the sun, and will occasionally graze it with sharp nails. If you are looking to be moved, then pick up this book and be whisked away to Ausubel’s worlds.

When the Emperor was Divine by Julie Otsuka (Penguin Classics): Also set in WWII, Otsuka introduces us to a Japanese-American family interned in desert camps starting in 1942. The family slowly disintegrates in the parched landscape, and Otsuka charts well how optimism turns into apathy. Within the confined space of 144 pages she is able to capture the psychological impacts of a concentration camp, and sheds light on a chapter of American history often obscured. Although this book is not quite as powerful as her Buddha in the Attic, it remains an important testimony to when people become afraid of their neighbors based on malicious fictions and false accusations. Particularly now it seems important to pay attention to history.

Refuge: Rethinking Refugee Policy in a Changing World by Alexander Betts and Paul Collier (Oxford University Press): This accessible and ambitious book engages with the relevant issue of the unfolding refugee crises. Betts and Collier outline why the current policies and projects are failing both through historical perspectives and philosophical underpinnings. It is exciting that the book provides solutions focusing on restoring the agency of refugees. This important and currently absent approach could radically improve the lives of the majority of refugees. The book does place a worrisome amount of trust on businesses to carry a significant burden of the cost and execution of refugee projects. The perspective remains interesting, even if steeped in capitalism. WC
The Reading Series in Review

By Jenika Kaul

Spaces & Places: While our cozy neighbor, the Elm Common Lounge, hosted most of our readings, Writers’ Centre events also appeared elsewhere on campus. The Black Box’s large screen was perfect for graphic writers Kristen Radtke and Scott Chua, with the artwork from their books sharing the stage with their words. The black & white drawings from Kristen’s memoir Imagine Wanting Only This contrasted with the colorful comics of Scott’s The Doorkeeper. Embracing the spirit of the Writers’ Centre symposium “A Community of Writers: Writing in the Liberal Arts,” the fiction readings of Sharon Solwitz and Maggie Tiojakin echoed through the campus from the Amphitheatre. Sharon’s story traveled back in time to 1960s USA, while Maggie’s excerpt from Winter Dreams and the Invincible Summer took the audience from Indonesia to the U.S. through the eyes of an immigrant.

Write Local, Read Global: Readings throughout the year featured many locally-based writers, diverse in background, genre and perspective. Their readings were followed by engaging conversations on process and inspiration. Poets Jason Wee and Rodrigo dela Pena shared their poetry at separate readings. Jason Wee read a single manuscript exploring themes of friendship and loss, while Rodrigo dela Pena read poems from his collection Hymnal about the search for the divine in the every day. Fiction writers Darryl Whetter and O Thiam Chin read excerpts from their recently published novels. Darryl’s novel, Keeping Things Whole, was vividly set on the border of the USA and his native Canada. Fox Fire Girl, O Thiam Chin’s novel, was a magical story beginning in a kampong in Malaysia. Noelle Q. de Jesus and Grace Chia discussed writing in different forms and the evolution of their work. Noelle shared two pieces, one a short story written years ago and another recently written flash fiction piece. Grace’s reading alternated between her poetry and prose, contrasting the two forms.

Workshop Til You Drop: In addition to their readings, many of the visiting authors led creative writing workshops for students. Burmese poet Ko Ko Thett read from his book The Burden of Being Burmese and led a workshop entitled “Poetry [At Language’s Edge]” where he discussed and probed different definitions of poetry. As a part of Diversity Week, David Carlin’s creative non-fiction workshop asked students to use techniques of observing and essaying to create a multi-faceted portrait of Singapore, skills he demonstrated at his reading of an essay about a visit to northern Finland. Peter Parsons, a short story writer, talked about the process of editing his own work at a reading and with Professor Hemley’s Advanced Fiction class. Lysley Tenorio led a fiction workshop on the importance of imagery and read a moving short story about a Filipino-American family from his collection Monstress. Journalist Jen Percy’s reading about a Japanese tsunami survivor complemented her workshop on interviewing and writing non-fiction profiles.

Intrigued? Want to read more? The Writers’ Centre library has a copy of these authors’ books on our shelves available to borrow. Come, browse and then sign out the book with Jenika. WC