This issue features writings by people born or working in Singapore, otherwise known as “Sing Lit”, short for “Singapore Literature”. Many people’s first encounter with local writing is as prescribed reads in school. That’s one way to take the fun out of anything.
In publicising her anthology of East and Southeast Asian short stories, the *BooksActually’s Gold Standard 2016*, editor Julie Koh mentioned the concept of a ‘bamboo ceiling’ that downplays the perceived value of Asian writing, when read in the context of Western cultural dominance. It’s a brand perception that Sing Lit is implicated in.

Text is not just words recorded on a reading surface. It also includes the spoken word and illustrations.

Modern art (in the Western world) was kicked off by Impressionists rejected from the Paris Salon, acceptance being hitherto a requirement for artworks to be taken seriously. With time, the idea of ‘literature’ may extend to internet blogs, cookbooks, lyric-based music, and other non-standard forms — and we do not need an establishment to achieve that.

For Singapore to be considered a nation of readers, let us reimagine what literature is. After all, social media posts are considered publishing. A while ago, the National Arts Council’s National Literary Reading and Writing Survey 2015 highlighted that the larger majority of Singaporeans and Permanent Residents polled predict for digital content to replace traditional books in the next two decades. Interestingly, the same survey indicated that only 1 in 4 survey respondents had ever read a literary book by a Singaporean writer, even though almost half of them have read at least one literary book in the 12 months prior.

This issue captures the delightful and wide-ranging nature of local writing through personal notebooks, drafts, and thoughts of writers. Read on!
WHAT YOU WRITE IS NOBODY'S BUSINESS. ISN'T THAT POETRY?

- WONG MAY
A WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

TSE HAO GUANG

Early draft of “Me Migrant”. This poem, originally written in Bengali, was eventually featured in Mukul’s poetry collection of the same name – *Me Migrant* (2016), published by Ethos Books.

TSE HAO GUANG

THE GLASS ESSAY

I can hear little clacks inside my dream.
Night drips in its silver tap
down the back.
At 4 A.M. I wake. Thinking
of the man who
left in September.
His name was Law.

My face in the bathroom mirror
has white streaks down it.
I raise the face and return to bed.
Tomorrow I am going to visit my mother.

**SHE**

She lives on a moor in the north.
She lives alone.
Spring opens like a blade there.
I travel all day on trains and bring a lot of books—

scene for my mother, scene for me
including *The Collected Works* of Emily Bronte.
This is my favourite author.

Also my main fear, which I mean to confront.
Whenever I visit my mother
I feel I am running into Emily Bronte.

Irony and God.

MD MUKUL HOSSINE

Tse Hao Guang’s thoughts on “The Glass Essay” by Anne Carson, from her book *Glass Irony and God*.
GENEVIEVE WONG

Writer and editor Genevieve Wong’s journal where she jots her observations, lists and everything that catches her attention. On this page, she imagines the Singapore Stone exploring the island.
FELIX CHEONG
Anatomy of a Poem

AN EXAMPLE OF A VILANELLE

Do not go gentle into that good night
by Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Tse Hao Guang is the author of two books, *hyperlinkage* (2013) and *Deeds of Light* (2015), both published by Math Paper Press. In this interview, he shares his literary habits, some of his favourite literature of Singapore and also his approach to creative writing.

Before becoming writers, they all started off as readers. Can you share more about the books you read and your literary habits?

I lean towards experimental poetry and prose, but I also love science fiction (sci-fi), fantasy, and comics. I tend to enjoy work that plays with time — non-linear narratives, time travel, stream of consciousness — as well as metafictional work that delves into the nature of stories and storytelling. Authors and books in those vein — the *Nocilla* trilogy by Augustin Fernandez Mallo, *A Void* by Georges Perec, the comic book series *Fables*, the crazy
near-future books by Michel Houellebecq (Atomised, Submission), most of Virginia Woolf but especially The Waves and Between the Acts, Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea, Empire of Memory by Eric Galimanda, etc. Other books and writers that may not fit the above criteria: Primo Levi’s accounts of surviving the Nazi camps in If This Is a Man and The Truce (he also wrote sci-fi short stories!), Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan series, Between Stations by Boey Kim Cheng, House of Glass by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Silence by Shusaku Endo. For poetry, Anne Carson, Derek Walcott, Memorial by Alice Oswald, Marianne Moore, Yearling by Lo Kwa Mei-En, A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle by Hugh MacDiarmid, Charles Olson, Wong May, and Arthur Yap.

Who are some of your favourite writers in Singapore and why?
I’m not sure “in Singapore” works for my purposes, so I’ll try “of Singapore” instead. I’ll talk about older writers and books — I think I need more distance from recent work. Tan Hwee Hwee’s Mammon Inc. was perhaps the first novel written by a Singaporean I ever read, and it still remains my favourite. It’s both sci-fi and social (megacorporation hiring cultural translators to facilitate neoliberalism — will the protagonist sell her soul?), but also, more importantly, really funny, well-written, and not at all caught up with Singapore as a Nation or Idea. Boey Kim Cheng’s Between Stations is a lyrical and deeply moving series of essays on not being at home. Wong May, although she has left Singapore, has four books of poetry that do wondrous things with language and silence. Arthur Yap’s poetry and prose I think most successfully captures a kind of localness in his use of malapropisms and poetic logic. Kuo Pao Kun (but he is so much more than a writer!) has several plays which, although I haven’t seen them staged, are in reading the strongest social texts I’ve ever encountered here.

Describe your approach to creative writing.
“Playfulness”. I won’t say more to pin me down, except that playfulness can be a serious thing!
Can you recommend some books on writing craft?
I don’t actually read craft books; I think the best learning occurs through reading good things and talking to the right people. I have enjoyed books about the increasing professionalisation of creative writing in America and elsewhere such as MFA vs NYC edited by Chad Harbach, and Workshops of Empire by Eric Bennett.

How do you know when a poem is complete?
I don’t — I generally give up on them.

As a young writer, what are your hopes for the future for Singapore literature?
I hope to see more writing with vision — and I don’t think I’ll be let down.
“Read this (at the library, because it is out of print) to understand that sometimes it is the wanderer and traveller who has the most urgent sense of what home means.”

_Tse Hao Guang_

**Between Stations**
Boey Kim Cheng
Giramondo Publishing,
New South Wales, Australia, 2009

English S821 BOE,
Singapore Collection
It is a joke among local poets that each of them must have a poem about the Merlion in their portfolio. This 1964 creation by Alec Frederick Fraser-Brunner for the Singapore Tourism Board is a well-known marketing icon, ready-made for artistic dissection. Poetry pioneer Edwin Thumboo got the water running with his 1979 ‘Ulysses by the Merlion’. Here, he and fellow editors compile works by those who followed his example. In keeping with the national spirit, the works featured cover all four of Singapore’s official languages.
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8. Image of Tse Hao Guang reading by Jon Gresham
NUMBERS & NICHES is a 10-part, monthly series of talks and curated content based on the library’s Arts Collection. Sequenced according to the Dewey Decimal Classification, each issue shines a spotlight on local practitioners and their specific art forms.

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