

A n a k S a s t r a

Issue 36

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Contributor Bios

Bridget Mabunga (Twitter: [@bcmabunga](#)) earned an M.A. in Creative Writing from Sacramento State University, where she won a Bazanella award for graduate creative nonfiction, and her nonfiction work has appeared in *Under the Gum Tree* and *Kartika Review* (nominated for a Pushcart Prize), *2012-2013 Kartika Review Anthology* and online at *MotherShould*. She's been a featured reader for True Story in Sacramento and was an assistant editor for *Narrative Magazine* for over four years. She's a writing specialist at the University of California, Davis and has completed her first novel manuscript, *Obedience*, and is drafting her second.

Ismim Putera was born and raised in Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia. He is currently working as a family medicine medical officer in a rural health clinic in Pulau Bruit, Sarawak. He graduated from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak in 2015. He enjoyed dance and drama during his student years and has written poems and fiction for the medical faculty annual magazine, *Unimed Magazine*. His works can be found online in *Poemhunter.com*, *Anak Sastra* and *Kunyit Squared Zine* Vol. 1 (2019).

Sofia Tanton is an Indonesian writer whose work mainly deals with politics, oppression and the people for whom this society's promises of equality, justice and freedom have been broken. She is based in South Tangerang and, when she is not writing, she can be found reading, browsing Instagram or editing her [blog](#).

CA Yin lives in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo with her husband and two German Shepherd-Labrador mixed-breed dogs, and during their study breaks, their two children. A former broadcast journalist, news anchor, editor, newspaper columnist and communications officer for a conservation organisation, her fiction and nonfiction writing have appeared in *Anak Sastra*, *e-Tropic*, *Particle* and the *Borneo Post*, among others.

John C. Mannone has work in *Artemis Journal*, *Poetry South*, *Blue Fifth Review* and others. He won the Jean Ritchie Fellowship in Appalachian literature (2017), served as celebrity judge for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (2018), and was nominated for Pushcart, Rhysling, Dwarf Star and Best of the Net awards. He has three poetry collections and edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex* and other venues. He's a retired physics professor in East Tennessee. He lives near Knoxville.

Megan Conley (Twitter: [@fatorangecat](https://twitter.com/fatorangecat)) is a Filipina-American emerging writer living outside of Washington, D.C. She recently finished a bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature at the University of Maryland, College Park, and she has never been published before.

Fara Ling has been published in the *Claremont Review* and the 2017 inaugural Georgetown Literary Fringe Festival. She launched and currently leads a literary zine for teenagers named *Lit Allsorts*. Its sixth publication is due in June. She enjoys learning about cognition, language, dance, and the connections between the three. Other loves of her eighteen-year-old lifetime include ais kacang and being alone in nature. She lives in Malaysia with her family and dog.

Khayma Balakrishnan enjoys sipping hot chocolate when she writes. When she isn't having hot chocolate or writing, she's either teaching, reading or chasing butterflies. She's really your clichéd version of the girl next door whose idea of an ideal weekend is curling up in bed the whole day with a good book or a great movie. She lives her life by two rules, which are, to be kind and to choose happiness, always and every single time.

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"Divining"

by Bridget Mabunga

In the dim light, Jun's head swivels between textbooks. Two days until his last third year exam, and not only must he pass, he must finish first in his class so he doesn't let his brother down. The pressure lurks just behind his ears, but Jun's always been good at focusing. He does not give in to the whisper in his head, *your brother, your Kuya, gave up his dream of studying aeronautical engineering, so he could provide you the opportunity he didn't have. You better not ruin it.* Jun lets the whisper hum like an engine that powers his mind, keeps him sharp. Carlo had joined the US Navy relinquishing his own dreams because *you always put family first*, he repeated like a birdsong each time he'd lectured Jun. *Nanay and Tatay are relying on us.*

Any time Jun wanted to quit or hang out with friends instead of studying, he listened to the quiet where his brother's voice had once been; *family first* he'd tell himself. He looks to the double picture frame in which Carlo poses on both sides. In the first photo, dressed in his Navy blues with well-shined shoes, Carlo stands on the deck of the USS *Canberra*, two feet from the edge, under an American flag larger than their *nipa hut* waving in the wind, another warship following close behind. Each day, his brother floats toward war putting his own life at risk because he puts family first. Jun runs his finger over the flag imagining the day he and his family will land on US shores and see that flag everywhere.

In the second photo, Carlo again stands on the ship's deck, this time dressed in crisp white pants and a white t-shirt wearing the same black shoes, one foot kicked up onto the railing as he leans over resting his elbow on his knee. The look on his face makes Jun guess this is the photo Carlo gives to all his girlfriends. Looking directly at the camera, he's not smiling with his mouth, but with his eyes, exuding a confidence Jun hopes he can one day attain.

"Playboy," Jun says laughing as he leans in examining the photo. Carlo had just visited last week, and the boys gathered all their *kompadres* and prowled Manila for beer and women

eventually catching up with Tito's cousin Alfonzo, the police officer who brought them to the special women's dorm. There, young college women with no family members supporting them earn money the only way they can. The first time Carlo took him there, Jun came out of the room and asked Carlo if he could do it again—excitement lapping his cheeks like a surfer who just rode his first wave to shore. Of course Carlo paid for another round. Jun hadn't been back since, but suggested it within five minutes of his brother's arrival. Neither Carlo, Jun, nor their buddies considered what life was like for those women, but they treated them with care and left a little more than the regular fee. The woman who serviced Carlo tried to give him a freebie since he was a seaman in the US Navy, but he insisted on paying, so she settled for a picture of him in his uniform instead.

After a long night of celebration, Jun and Carlo walked back to Jun's room. Jun could feel minutes passing like breaths. He began speaking a few times but let the words merge with traffic. When he figured out what to say, his dry lips stuck together as if trapping the words.

"*Kuya*, I am living up to your hard work. I passed all of my exams so far, and I know I will pass these too." Jun's voice cracked a little as it always had whenever he was nervous. "I am proud of you little brother." Carlo reached out for Jun's shoulder, pulled him into a side-hug. Jun moved close to his brother hoping Carlo would hold onto him for a while. Having him near enhanced the feeling of loneliness Jun felt each time his brother departed, but Carlo's embrace was strong and stable. Jun imagined the Virgin following them home as Carlo began another tale of a new girlfriend and the latest adventures of hiding her from the others. Once Jun earned his degree and Carlo finished his tour, they would be inseparable—meeting women in pairs, watching to see which chooses whom. Neither had trouble getting women's attention, and they joked about the fun they'd have together trying to trick women into thinking they are twins. With Jun's degree and *Kuya's* US citizenship, days of pounding rice in the fields would be over.

The clock's ticking distracts Jun from the answer to an equation he's been pursuing for the last twenty minutes. He removes his shirt tossing it over the clock. Eyes bounce from page to book. Ink splotching paper, black pools connect on the page. Then, a knock at the door. Jun

looks up, begins to push his chair back but rethinks it. There's no time for visiting, no time for distraction. He looks back to the problem, but he's pulled out now; it'll take a few minutes to get back in—and there's the door again. It might do him some good to take a break, come back with fresh eyes. He takes the shirt from the clock, tosses it over the textbook, and gets up to answer the door.

"Can we speak to Jun?" mutters the short sweaty guy. The tall one with curly hair stands silent, stale alcohol seeping from him. Jun looks down at the short guy trying to figure out if he knows him.

Cars honk on the street. The short one smirks, looking like he could stand there all day. The tall guy sways and begins pushing his hands into his pockets and removing them. The upstairs neighbors turn on their radio. Diesel permeates the block as afternoon traffic begins.

"Are you Jun?" says the short guy with one hand behind his back. A *calesa* passes, the horse's hooves clop clopping as the carriage rolls along.

"Yeah," Jun replies, getting ready to put out his hand.

The blade's shimmer forces his hand up instead of out, but he's not quick enough. The knife penetrates his stomach. Twists. Turns. Lodges like a machete into a banyan trunk. Warm pools spill down his abdomen, stain his pants. The men flee, and Jun hugs the door frame. His head bangs against the wall before he passes out.

On the operating table, he wakes. Eyes water from the blinding light. At first he's confused. But then he sees the surgeon, masked and holding something gleaming, he presses into Jun's abdomen. Jun sucks in air like he does each time he meets the sea breeze on his trips home to the province. But he can't fill his lungs. His breath comes in spurts, like a worn zipper. His heart slows. Each beat another opportunity. The light dims and brightens with every new voice. He can't tell how many others are there.

"Excuse me," he coughs, "doctor?" Jun tries to rise, but the doctor presses him back. "Please do everything you can to save me." His strength wasted, Jun's head falls back, eyes water. "Please, my brother, he can pay you," he whispers. "Please. He's in the US Navy." His eyes close.

What would you do if you could do it all over again? I hunched over books, ran through theoretical equations while eating. I visited the library for its silence; I visited classrooms for their cold, clear knowledge seeping up from hard desks. There was something about sitting in those chairs, the way the metal linked with wood, the clank my book bag made against the hollow leg. It was as if everything was empty, just waiting for the professor to come and fill it. I so longed to be full that I barely looked around, noticed the way the sun shone through the window. I was filling my head with knowledge, with numbers. I didn't know I wouldn't have time to fill the rest of my life.

If I could do it again, of course I wouldn't answer the door. I'm not so sure how I would handle the rest of it. Maybe I would have skipped the books a little, bumped into girls in the hall.

Steel instruments clink, the gauze soaks. People scurry around the table calling out code words. Someone brings the blood. Jun's eyes flutter open, then close again.

Here I am walking through the quad, rather than take the shortcut through darkened halls, I opt for the sun. As usual it's baking my arms, and I should cover them, rush into shade, but I like the way the heat lifts each hair on my arm, presses my shirt to my shoulders. They all say, "You better cover up; you're gonna get too dark." I used to listen, by plastering a large hat over my head and covering my knees with slacks. Today, though, each gram of heat slows my racing mind: *Will I pass the exam? Are Nanay and Tatay working too hard? How much longer until I can lift their burden? Will Carlo survive the war to help me help them?* The sun licks away my thoughts, highlights a new angle of the Office of Administration building, and bounces off a curve in the lawn I hadn't noticed. Then her skirt flits past me.

Normally, I'd miss this, head in a book while walking to class or eyes turned toward thoughts instead. Not today. Before my thoughts can yank me back, I whirl around like a civet giving chase. Her flowered hem flutters as if it's dropping petals in the breeze. There is no real breeze, but her walk simulates the flow of ocean air. I can almost smell the sea.

She trots along, fingers in perpetual wave as it seems she knows everyone she passes. It's clear those she doesn't know wish to change that, so I increase my gait hoping to keep pace but not yet ready to give myself away. No one seems to notice I'm trailing her. We arrive near the edge of campus and she slows to an amble as if contemplating whether she should leave.

She steps into the street as a car rushes by. I reach out, but she's quick and hops back onto the sidewalk. I want to throw my books at the car, protect her like my *lolo*—*escrima* champion and strongest man in the village. He'd defeated so many men, they finally cut a coconut in half, placed the flat side on the ground and made him stand on the rounded side to fight. He spun his sticks so fast, like helicopter blades. Even though he was tethered to coconut, he won every match. We come from fighting stock, my brothers and I—wide-set shoulders, thick legs I would have grown into. She turns back onto campus.

She stops on the corner, turns around facing the giant banyan. But it's too late. Lost in my head again, I step into her with more force than a *carabao* dragging a cart almost knocking the wind out of myself. As she falls, I catch her but drop my books, which barely clear her painted toes. Her fingers dig so hard into my shoulder I know I'll feel her presence for at least a week. She's laughing in my arms: head thrown back, giggle like bubbles under water. I try to maintain my position, just off-balance enough so she can't right herself, but not so off that I'll land on top of her. Before I know it, she's squirmed her way right and looks up at me through square-rimmed glasses. I hadn't actually seen her face. Almond eyes feathered in thick lashes blink fast, but the rest of her face is calm. She puts out her hand.

"Hi, I'm Divina." Her blush proves she's not as cool as she seems.

"Jun," I say, unable to forget the strength with which she clung to me.

"Do you go here?" She says just before the pause becomes awkward. I nod. "What are you studying?" I want to say *the lines of your body*, but "Engineering" comes out instead.

"Really? You must be smart," she winks. I straighten my shoulders, run fingers over the back of my hair.

"My family seems to think so," I say, unable to believe I actually said something so arrogant.

"Are you a little tired after our crash?" She asks, and I realize she's referring to the heat sliding up my cheeks, my breath coming in gasps.

“No, but I am sorry I knocked you over like that,” I say. Just then, a group of students arrives behind Divina; they slow down, surround us.

“Oh, hi Selming,” Divina greets her friend with a kiss I imagine planted on my own cheek.

“Come on Dee-ving, we’re gonna be late for class,” Selma grabs her friend’s arm.

“Okay, I’ll be there in a second.” Divina takes out a note pad and pen. She writes her name, number and a heart just under it before tearing off the sheet and handing it to me. She plants an effervescent kiss on my cheek like a firefly taking flight.

As she walks away, I try to measure the space between her curves and the heat given off by her lips. I want to linger over her form, run my fingers up the full length of her leg—learn every inch of her so I could build the perfect structure with her measurements. She floats away as if her dress were made of tiny wings.

The surgical team replaces tools, tosses soaked cloths into tub. The doctor removes his mask. “Time of death?” he says.

“8:29 pm,” one nurse says as the other nurse pulls the sheet over Jun’s head.

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“The Snake Queen”

by Ismim Putera

Potiani got *her* from the Khan brothers, the Pakistanis who usually came to Batu Pahat to sell carpet in the *pasar tani* in Jalan Omar. They also sell some other things, like necklaces of shells and small beads, bottled perfume, tree saplings and small potted cacti arranged neatly on the canvas by the roadside.

“Karpet, karpet, karpet. Satu lima puluh, satu lima puluh.”

(Carpet, carpet, carpet. One for fifty [ringgit], one for fifty [ringgit]).

Tired of calling the customers all night, they decided to take out their most precious possession—the cobra. They put her in the middle of the crowd and the elder brother sat cross-legged and meditated for several minutes in front of the sealed jar. Within a few seconds people flooded into their tent, each was holding a mobile phone to record the late night show. He lifted the lid and began blowing into the wooden *pungi*, while inflecting the intonation by manipulating the air flow with his fingers. Strangely, he was able to integrate nose and mouth breathing skilfully without any interruption and gave out a consistent melody.

“*Fuuu...fuuu...fuuu...fuuu...*” The wooden *pungi* emitted the lilting continuous high-pitch sound to charm the snake. The cobra erected her hood and straightened her spine through the opening. She was defending herself from countless unknown threats. The sound was simply too distressing for her reptilian auditory canals to perceive. She expanded her hood further and the golden black markings on each side of her hood became prominent like two splenetic eyes. She was warning the brothers not to disturb her again. She forcibly hissed to dampen the sound away and to dissuade the crowd. She let out her salivary forked tongue to impress her enemies that she was a dangerous adversary.

“*Fuuu...fuuu...fuuu...fuuu...*”

The crowd clapped their hands softly in order not to scare the snake away. They began filming her without her consent. They cheered and attracted more and more people towards her. The crowd was getting closer to her. Her “snake zone” was shrinking considerably due to the growing crowds. The closest prey was only a slipper-distance away.

“Sss...sss...sss...” she tried to enlarge her space. The effort however was fruitless.

It was then that Potiani appeared as one of the crowd. The cobra noticed her presence amongst the chaos. She could sense her irresistible serpentine aura, unmistakably as strong as the Gorgons. She was glad that someone could speak the parseltongue as fluent as those enchantresses from the times of King Solomon.

“Bite the man behind you. He’s very rude!” she heard Potiani commanding her.

“Do it now!”

The snake swayed along with the flow of the flute and turned herself to face her crowd. She aimed at the left thigh. It was badly tanned and hairy. The man was too busy filming her with his mobile phone.

“Look at me beautiful snake! Look at me!”

As fast as lightning, she went and sank her fang into the flesh, delivering the most potent toxin from her engorged neurotoxic glands.

“Aiyo...aiyo...aiyo...” The man shouted with his Chinese accent and agonised in pain. He fell as the numb limb failed to support him. He shook his leg violently to disengage her bite from him.

“God! The snake! The snake!” People were running away from the site and cried in fear.

She was forced back into the basket with a pair of wooden sticks.

The man was still sitting on the ground, holding his right bruised thigh. He had torn his shirt and tied it a few inches from the bite mark to halt the blood flow and prevent the toxin from ascending into his vital organs. He was gasping as they carried him into the ambulance. His limb was badly swollen and bruised. The surrounding skin around the bite mark had thinned and detached. It was too late.

The Khan brothers hit the panic button and brought the snake back into their van and hurriedly closed down their tent. Potiani approached them “I want it, the snake in the basket. Tell me how much you want!”

The brothers were speechless. After receiving some five hundred ringgit, they drove away from the night market. Potiani held the basket with the snake. Learning the arts from the cobra would amplify her serpentine power.

The room was like a mini zoo. Potiani had collected many reptiles, which included: scorpions, frogs, lizards, iguanas, snakes, a *biawak* and crocodiles. Each of them were put into a separate cage and fed accordingly. There were five different modified aquariums to store the snakes. The snakes entangled themselves on the branch, languorously hissing at their visitors. She obtained those animals from the black market, often from the Indonesian and Philippine sellers who pretended to sell clothes, medicinal oils, and crafts at the Sunday market. She had befriended them and they would call her if they had any unlucky animals in their traps disguised amongst the dried leaves on the forest floor.

She had an unusual fondness for those legless, slimy creatures. She admired Medusa very much, after she had watched several movies and read books about her.

Medusa was once a beautiful priestess of Athena’s temple. Poseidon raped her, which enraged Athena. And, instead of saving her, Athena cursed Medusa and made her into a scaly part-woman, part-snake mythological creature bearing a serpent-infested head. Her face was also terribly deformed, that the mere sight of it would turn any onlookers into stone.

Potiani wanted to dip her human fangs with all the exotic features of every kind of venomous snake, in order to make herself the Snake Queen. She had two vipers, three mambas, a reticulated python, and one cobra. The cobra was her absolute favourite. The cobra was a naja, an Indian cobra.

She had wished to be able to morph herself magically into a snake and feed on the young men who were bold enough to reject her love. Often enough, she would immerse herself in the bathtub with the two-metre long reticulated python *ular sawa batik*, a fine captive-bred

specimen from Cambodia. If she were to be reincarnated, she would choose to become the fourth Gorgon sister after the infamous Medusa, Stheno, and Euryale:

“Near them their sisters three,
The Gorgons, winged
With snakes for hair—hatred
of mortal man—

“And I am the forth sister.” She talked to the *ular sawa batik*, a snake with a bright yellow skin with alternating brown and black rectangular patches within the diamond-shaped patterns that formed a tessellation on the cylindrical body. The snake coiled most of the lower half of its body and rested on her tummy while its head was held close to her chest and neck. And the snake would communicate with her, by brilliantly flickering its smooth scaly body to coordinate the underlying muscles, thus altering the configuration of the tessellation. She could decipher those signs, they often mimicked loneliness, despair, anguish, and unhappiness.

Potiani sat on the sofa. She was very excited with her plan. She thought, “Sometimes the Gods were too slow to give the appropriate punishment. Using this gift, I can torture her alone.”

Potiani’s husband, Shahril was devastated. He thought he could find new hope through this father’s will. But that old man gave him nothing but acres of empty land. He sold every piece of it to cover his unworldly debt. With the remaining excess cash, he sought enjoyment and promiscuous courtship. He had begun to like his secretary. She was funny and beautiful. They had sex many times in the hotel and Potiani could smell the reeks of his semen every time he came home.

“Who is that woman?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know you have someone else!”

“You are crazy!”

“I’m not crazy and I know you have someone else!” She raised her voice, trying to spit at him with poisons.

“Leave me alone!”

“Don’t you play with me!”

“Go away!”

She knew about his mistress. The girl was a well-trained gold-digger. Retarded and myopic men like her husband would easily fall into her trap. Indeed, he had already given her a lot of money to please their relationship and promised to marry her.

Potiani was ahead of them. She read their plans with the ease of browsing a magazine. So, she ordered her ‘best friend’ to wait silently in their car, lurking underneath the front seat. When she saw the girl enter the car with her husband, she whistled a fine tune of wrath. Her ‘best friend’ woke up. It saw two fleshy calves in front of her, covered faintly by a skirt. It wanted a pair of legs too, like its distant reptilian cousins. Having legs is far better than walking on your belly. As Potiani laughed and stomped her feet, it gave two sweet bites simultaneously, envenoming the girl with endless excruciating pain.

“Ouch! Help, my feet! My feet!”

Her fangs pierced deep into the muscles, rupturing the veins. The girl screamed in the car like she was possessed by a ghost. Blood oozed out from the angry-looking wounds and stained the seat.

“Help! Help! It’s painful! I can’t move my legs!”

The paramedics ran towards them and flung the stretcher out. She was rushed to the Yellow Zone in the emergency room. Anti-venom was injected. She was hospitalised, bed-bound, and succumbed a few days later.

Shahril was driven mad by her untimely death and had to cancel the wedding reception they had planned. He locked himself in his room, abusing *syabu* and *ganja* to the point that he set the cupboard on fire from severe hallucinations. Potiani filed for divorce and he was later registered to be kept in a mental institution. She would visit him once every few months.

“How are you?” she visited him one hot afternoon.

“I saw it, the snake, snake, snake...”

“What snake?”

“The snake, it has your eyes!”

“Stop thinking about the snake!”

“But it has your eyes! They are golden, black, and shiny.”

“Enough Shahril, I’m not a snake. Now please behave. The doctors are complaining that you ran amok a few times this week, throwing the chairs and tables at nurses and paramedics.”

“But I saw the snake. It was big! Very big! It wants to eat me!”

“Ok then! Promise me you won’t do that again. I will kill the snake for you. No more snakes anymore.”

“You will?”

“Yes!”

Mak Pot combed her thick black hair in front of the mirror. The mirror did not keep any secrets. The mirror was behaving like the pearl. The clam takes in whatever is around it and moulds it into a gem. If the sand is pure, then the pearl is white. If the dust is black, then the pearl is dark.

She was an unworldly creature that had the features of a Gorgon serpent and an Atlantean octopus. *That was her truest form.* Her upper half of the body is where all the most-feared tentacles were. Her tentacles were segmented and cylindrical, they were an assembly of strong fat muscles and pointy finger-like projections. They were as exquisite as the staghorn corals. They could strangulate any living thing, while the pointy finger-like projections could perforate the body of enemies and suck their life essence. The lower part of her body was like that of a snake, flexible feet for her to swim in the sea and glide on the land. She was the Queen of all Seven Seas—more realistic than Ursula, as the mirror had told her many times.

She moved her hands to apply the youth-retaining lotion, a topical cream rich with ocean floor minerals taken directly from the core of the erupting volcanic vents.

With the money from her husband, she used it to shop in the black market, disguised as a herpetologist. She smuggled many species from different lands and waters, earning a huge sum of money from it.

Once again she took a brisk walk in her room, examining her collection repeatedly. It was already late and most of the nocturnal animals had slept quietly after feeding.

Only the Indian Cobra, in her small aquarium, was still awake, acknowledging her presence....

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“Pay Up”

by Sofia Tantonno

After making his way out of Jakarta’s labyrinth of streets and sidewalks, Adi found himself in the city’s slums. Amongst all the dreary, tightly-packed houses with roofs of corrugated steel and deteriorating brick walls, mountains of rubbish that seemed like they could engulf the entire area and small shops that reeked of cigarettes, it did not take him long to find the right house. It looked derelict and tired from years of fighting off the scorching sun and pouring rain that would flood Jakarta every so often, drowning the asphalt roads in water and covering the ground like a blanket. The grey structure was devoid of paint, had square holes for windows and a sheet of tin functioning as a roof topped it off like frosting on a cake. Fat off-white bags of garbage, crushed bits of plastic waste and old takeaway containers surrounded the house like faithful citizens gathered around the embalmed corpse of their beloved leader at a state funeral. Adi knocked on the wooden door.

“Excuse me!” he called out. “Is anybody home?”

There was no response.

“Hello? Is anybody there?” He knocked louder this time.

Still no response.

Adi tried to take a peek into one of the windows. Nobody was inside. Maybe it really is empty, he thought. He considered turning back to go home, but remembered that whoever might be inside could easily be hiding to avoid him. After all, nobody liked his kind much.

“Hello? I know someone’s in there.” He was beginning to get irritated. “Open up. Please.”

Whoever was inside the house, if there was anyone inside at all, did not budge. The only reply Adi got was from the light breeze that flew by. He sighed, sat in front of the house with his knees propped up on his chest and leaned on a wall.

Hours must have passed when Adi opened his eyes, waking up from a slumber he did not expect to fall into. His vision was fuzzy and it would take a few minutes before they adjusted to the bright moonlight. The sky was a deep blue and a menacing grey smog rendered the stars invisible. The moon was the sole source of illumination and it spilled its rays of light indiscriminately: over the gleaming city centre and gloomy slums, for the businessman and the beggar, lighting the smooth path of wealth and the rocky alleyway of poverty.

Perhaps sensing that Adi would not leave them alone otherwise, whoever was inside decided to unlock their door. When he heard the clicks of a turning key, he started and stood directly in front of the door.

Presently, a woman stood in the doorway. She looked just as tired and worn-out as her house, with faint creases gracing her forehead accumulated from decades of worrying about whether or not she could afford dinner today. Her hair was scrunched up into a rushed bun and her hands were rough—a testament to the long, hard hours she worked every day. The bags beneath her eyes weighed down the rest of her face, which was twisted into a peculiar, concerned expression.

“What do you want?” she asked, her voice sounding weary.

“You know what I’m here for,” he replied sternly.

The woman heaved a heavy sigh. “Look, you know I don’t have the money. If I did, don’t you think I would’ve paid them back by now? When I do have money, that’s going to be the first thing I do. I promise.”

“That’s what you always say.”

“I mean it. Give me time, please sir. I really don’t have any money right now.”

“And when will that be?”

“I don’t know! I really don’t know but believe me, I’ll try my best. Look at him!” She pointed to a boy sprawled across a tattered mattress with an arm dangling weakly off it, his reddened face tinged with discomfort. “He’s been sick like this for three days, and I can’t

even afford any medicine for him. How on Earth would I have any money lying around for you?"

"I'm sorry about that, but it's none of my concern." Adi felt a pang of remorse for saying that. "What I am concerned about, though, is when you're going to pay back what you owe."

The woman, with a tremendously swift speed, almost like a reflex, whipped out a small knife and put it to Adi's neck. He could feel its sharp tip almost puncturing his skin.

"I said I don't have any money." Her tone was akin to the low growl of a threatened dog.

"I-I'm just trying to do my job!" Adi began nervously. "Please put—please put that down. If I don't get you to pay your debt back, I'll be fired and then I won't have a job and then—"

"That's none of my concern," she mocked. "I don't have any money right now. Full stop." She drove the tip of the knife just underneath the surface of his skin, leaving behind a tiny cut.

In defeat, Adi walked home with his shoulders slumped and head hung, his hand clutching the wounded part of his neck. His house was not more lavish than the woman's by any measure: it was made of wooden planks and had a rusty steel panel for a roof. The red paint on its walls was fading like an old memory and a string of shirts and trousers that hung out to dry were the only things that gave the house any sort of vibrant colour. Adi turned the corroded doorknob, stepped inside and hurriedly closed the door.

As he quietly tiptoed into the house, Adi saw his daughter asleep on a sunken, brown fabric sofa with white stuffing poking out of its widening holes. She was a fragile creature, seven years of age, with tired eyes, lips like a young rosebud and copper skin. Her little chest was rising and sinking slowly in her deep slumber. Adi looked at her lovingly, feeling as if he was in the presence of the most valuable treasure in the whole world. He wanted to walk over and kiss her on the forehead, as was the routine when he came home, but did not do that this time for fear of waking her up.

This silence was broken by a knock on the door. Startled, Adi hurriedly ducked behind a dingy wardrobe like a terrified rodent hiding from its predator. He hoped, with all

the desperation of a soldier hiding from enemy bullets, that the person at the door would eventually grow exhausted and go away, but the knocks only kept getting louder.

Adi did not like his kind much, either.

* * * * *

“Seduku”

by CA Yin

The young man raises the axe and strikes the post with it.

“If you take my orangutan, I will kill you.”

He raises the axe again and cuts up the post of the *langkau* shed located in the middle of the field.

Banggan Empulu says to the young man, “I’ll pay for the milk, whatever you gave for the sugar cane. I’ll give you eighty ringgit.”

The young man rages on with the sharp axe in his hand, but finally, he gives in. He must, for Banggan is a forest guard, and he has the government behind him. The officers at the Forestry Department nearby in Lingga were the ones who had written the report about the baby orangutan that was being kept in a *langkau*. Banggan had been directed by his superiors at Forestry Department Headquarters in Kuching to go to the village in Sebuyau to find that baby orangutan and to bring it back to Kuching.

It is the mid-1970s and Semenggoh Wildlife Centre has recently been established. Several other confiscated orangutans have been brought here, and, along with gibbons, Lesser Adjutant Storks are housed in cages.

Banggan travels back to Kuching with the baby orangutan. It is scrawny and weak. The angry young man with the axe had refused to tell him where he had found it or what had happened to its mother. A young orangutan depends on its mother for its first five years, clinging almost continuously to her for the first year of its life. Banggan knows this young orangutan has lost its mother too soon.

At Semenggoh Wildlife Centre, the young orangutan is given a name: Seduku. She is named after the small village where she had been found in the coastal town of Sebuyau. It is too soon to let her roam freely with the other orangutans, so she is caged. What does the young orangutan make of this new home? Does it remind her of her birthplace in the forest

of Sebuyau? Or is the only thing that she remembers the wooden *langkau* where a young man occasionally visited her and fed her? Is his the only touch she remembers?

The wildlife centre is nestled in a nature reserve where the confiscated animals are gradually released when they are believed to be ready to learn to forage and make nests for themselves in the trees. Seduku is eventually allowed out of her cage and brought to a small clearing in the forest where a rope dangles enticingly from a branch. She ambles around the ground, while the forest guard or keeper watches her, waiting. Sometimes, this goes on for days, but eventually, the young orangutan learns to climb up the rope, up the tree and into the canopy, to perch on branches with her strong feet and hands.

Twice a day fresh fruit, such as bananas and papayas, are left at the feeding platform where visitors are allowed to gather to catch a glimpse of these great apes. During the fruiting season when the fruits and figs are plentiful, the semi-wild orangutans roaming in the nature reserve rarely visit the feeding areas. Visitors leave disappointed, but this is the way the gradual rehabilitation of the confiscated wild animals works. They are not caged nor confined in enclosures as animals in zoos but are free to roam the nature reserve.

The truth is, though, they are confined nonetheless. The boundaries of the nature reserve are not visible to our eye, but on the outskirts of the reserve are villages and residential areas. Human habitation has pushed and squeezed the wild animals into an area of 653 hectares. During the fruiting season, some orangutans will venture to the orchards or fruit trees in gardens of the nearby villages. This is a concern, but so far, the villagers have generally tolerated the incursions.

When she is still not fully grown—less than five years old—and when she should still be with her mother, Seduku is selected along with two other young orangutans for a rehabilitation and release attempt at Ulu Sebuyau. The wildlife officer who decides this is an expatriate who has worked in forestry and wildlife in Nigeria and Hong Kong. He has worked tirelessly to secure alternate transportation for the young orangutans so they don't have to make the arduous road and river trip from Semenggoh to Ulu Sebuyau.

Sedated for the journey on a Malaysian Air Force helicopter, Seduku and the two other orangutans, Bullet and Banggan (named for the same forest guard who rescued her), arrive at Sebuyau. Thulu Ayu accompanies them on this journey, as he is the keeper from Semenggoh who is most familiar to the young orangutans. At the makeshift landing pad

behind a primary school, Banggan Empulu waits for them. He has been in Ulu Sebuyau for three months preparing for the rehabilitation and release of these young orangutans. Under instructions from the wildlife officer, he has employed local villagers to assist in building three cages—each strong enough to house an orang-utan—and to make a trail to the release site.

When the helicopter lands and Thulu emerges, he hands Banggan a piece of cigarette paper. Banggan unfolds the small piece of paper and reads: “On arrival, please release.”

Banggan and the team have been preparing for a soft release, where the orangutans would be fed in their cages and slowly acclimatised to the new surroundings before being allowed out on their own. The instructions on the piece of cigarette paper are flatly the opposite of this plan. But Banggan is just a forest guard, and he must obey orders from the wildlife officer.

The next morning, the three orangutans are released from their cages. Despite instructions to simply let them go, Banggan leaves fruit beside the cages. He is fearful the young orangutans will not be able to cope in the forest on their own. For three days, the orangutans return and eat the fruit. After the third day, they do not return. Perhaps they have found an abundance of fruit and figs, maybe they have managed to make their own nests and are adapting. It is impossible to tell. So Banggan, the few staff from Semenggoh, and some villagers who are eager to help set out to search for the orangutans. They try to track them but are unable to find them for an entire week. Only then do they come across Banggan, the female orangutan with beautiful shiny, bushy hair. She is lying dead at the foot of a tree, thin and limp.

The forest guard looks at his namesake; the young orangutan he had been sent out to recover from a longhouse in Batang Ai. The longhouse folk had not known how to care for the orphaned orangutan and had reported to the Forestry Department. Banggan believes she has died from starvation, and the other two orangutans must be found as soon as possible.

After weeks of searching, the Forestry Department receives a call from local farmers reporting two orangutans in their pepper garden. Seduku and Bullet are enticed with some fresh fruit, and when Banggan appears to lead them to the cages, they follow him willingly.

Seduku is brought back to Semenggoh Wildlife Centre. She and Bullet seem to recover from their brief experience of “freedom” at Ulu Sebuyau. The failed rehabilitation attempt that took the life of the young orangutan Banggan shocked many, including the disappointed wildlife officer, who later leaves for a job with a conservation organisation in Indonesia.

As time goes by, visitors are treated to Bullet’s antics imitating his human keepers, pushing wheelbarrows, and sweeping the leaves with a rake. The wife of the Forestry Department’s deputy director brings her children to enjoy the trails and shady trees and to watch the orangutans up close. Bullet sidles up to her and leans against her leg and side, rubbing against her. Seduku is quiet and stays away. She appears calm and thoughtful. But who knows what an orangutan is thinking?

Seduku’s reputation as a gentle, calm and happy orangutan grows when she bears her first baby. Over the following years, she becomes a poster child for successful rehabilitation techniques and release at the nature reserve. The semi-wild colony of orangutans is growing, and Seduku has three more babies. Biologists and conservationists argue whether the breeding of semi-wild orangutans should be encouraged or disallowed. Nonetheless, over the years, more confiscated animals are brought to the Centre, and more babies are born. The nature reserve has more than reached its capacity, so newly confiscated orangutans are taken to an alternate site: Matang Wildlife Centre.

In the wild, orangutans have been known to live up to 35 years; in zoos, the oldest has lived for 59 years. Seduku is considered a success story. Now in her 40s, she is still breeding with a succession of live babies thriving. She roams Semenggoh Nature Reserve but returns for the fresh fruit with her young in tow. The visitors love her, and she is referred to as a surrogate mother to orphaned young ones. We could say that her roots are now firmly entrenched in Semenggoh Nature Reserve. The failed release at Ulu Sebuyau, near where she had been originally found, tells us that her adoption is complete.

What are roots anyway? Are they a sense of belonging to a physical place? Can our roots shift if we are torn away too young, or adapt so thoroughly to a new home? Placing Seduku back where she originated failed miserably, in part, perhaps because science then was not as advanced as it is today. What do we actually know as humans or about animals when it comes to rehabilitation and freedom? What really are our roots, and how strongly

do they figure in our lives? I remember what a friend once told me: home is where my loved ones are; it doesn't matter where I am, in Sarawak or in California, so long as I'm with the people I love.

Seduku sways gently amid the branches. Cautiously, she lowers herself and her baby to the platform. She picks up a banana and peels it. Her lips pucker as she nibbles the fruit. Her baby clings to her. Seduku ignores the humans watching her. She eats till she's had enough. Slowly, she reaches up and grasps the rope. Within moments, she disappears into the canopy. Perhaps she will be back tomorrow.

* * * * *

“Ring of Fire”

by John C. Mannone

I raise my arms in praise
to the Indonesian sun templed in

the palms of my hands and the moon
is offered on that golden platter.

Through the island palms, the sky
breathes flames lapping water

the ocean washes with a burnt
orange where the sun spills fire,

heat dissolving in emerald and silver
shadows, but soon, hope

will once again be eclipsed
by a heat-filled mountain below

the waves, no longer dormant.

Author's Note: On the occasion of the Jan 26, 2009 annular eclipse of the sun (ring of fire) only visible on a path traversing the southern Indian Ocean. See [Astronomy Picture of the Day](#). The ring of fire is also an allusion to the volcanically active region in the Pacific resulting in earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and devastating tsunamis.

* * * * *

“Love Poem to Tagalog, or Five Days in the Philippines”

by Megan Conley

like mangoes, the words fall from the phone, ripe and round in tagalog.
hesitant, vertigo tongue, my love is phonetic: *ta – ga – log*.

i.
the homeland sticks to the roof of my mouth like the *r*'s i can't roll.
sorry: *Hindi...si – ya makapag...salita ng – Tagalog?*

ii.
between mouthfuls of adobo and laughter, they all call her *lola*.
grandma, a stalagmite into air, unbent to the flow of tagalog.

iii.
we crack flower pots for lolo, make shells to hide candles from rain,
crown his tombstone in light and laurel; a king etched in tagalog.

iv.
the springs of luzon hold memory. in my mother's hair, the water twists
her into the girl on the dresser: me – if only i spoke tagalog.

v.
manila is poverty and glue and music and *ate megan* and
then, it is gone. when the mangoes fall, i listen for tagalog.

* * * * *

“You”

by Fara Ling

you
haven't found what you're looking for
I know
Neither have I.
Manufacture a thousand empty clicking clichés
to cure this twisted longing
No place like
Is where the heart is
Home sweet
Call them soul balms, anesthesia,
call them idiocy. Hear them clack listlessly in the sodden air
warped beads of syllables hanging disjointedly
Cooked dinners, cousins, TV
elusive perpetual motion
the mundane whirring humming clanking clattering
in hapless tattoos.
Home –
stretch the syllable over your tongue as your mouth dries
Sucked cavity, yawning ache
For something beyond this drooling suffocation
Tell me, how do you find something that's not there?

* * * * *

“To the Man Who Would Never Marry Me Because His Amma Told Him Not To”

by Khayma Balakrishnan

I am that girl with the bindi and the foul mouth,
I am that girl you bumped into at the bar in Bangsar,
Vodka in hand, flirting with the DJ,
I am that girl you flirted shamelessly with,
I am that girl you asked out because I fit your fantasies,
I am the girl you wanted to take home, to marry,
I am the girl you wanted as mother to your children.

But,
I am the girl your Amma told you about,
I am the girl she warned you from,
I am the girl she told you not to marry.

Because,
I am the girl who spoke her thoughts out loud,
I am the girl who questioned your customs and traditions,
I am the girl who refused to tie a saree,
I am that girl with short crop tops and ripped jeans, that you said looked sexy
I am the girl who questioned your Papa for sitting in the living room while your Amma
toiled in the kitchen,
I am girl who fought for your sister to go out to prom night with her boyfriend,
I am the girl who refused to be vegetarian on a Friday
I am the girl who said no to cooking chicken curry on a Sunday,

I am the girl who refused to eat last,
I am the girl who expected YOU to make ME coffee in the morning,
I am the girl who dressed as she pleased and danced in the rain,
I am the girl your Amma found you fondling and cuddling on the sofa,
I am the girl you couldn't wait to make love to.

In short,

I am the girl who lived by her terms,
I am the girl your Amma wanted to be but she could not
I am the girl your Amma envies
I am the girl your Amma sees her younger self in,
Thus, I am the girl your Amma will never allow you to have