

Anak Sastra, Issue 2

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[Sharanya Manivannan](#) was born in India in 1985, and grew up in Sri Lanka and Malaysia. An author and columnist, her first book of poems was *Witchcraft* (2008). Her poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in over two dozen journals and anthologies, including *Drunken Boat*, *Softblow*, *Killing the Buddha*, and *Full of Crow*.

Rafi Abdullah is an aspiring writer. He recently graduated from Universiti Sains Malaysia and has lived in Penang his whole life. But unlike his story's main character, he has travelled off the island. His short stories have appeared in a few journals and magazines, and he is working on a story collection.

[Bryan Norman](#), originally from Curaçao, has been living in Singapore for six years. In awe of Malaysia's expansive natural reserves and its exotic flora and fauna, he spends many a weekend exploring pristine mangroves, rain forests and beaches, meeting the local population, and sampling local cuisine. Bryan is a firm believer in "Malaysia Boleh".

Tia Sumito works for an environmental NGO in Indonesia. She has lived on five Indonesian islands and studied in Australia. This is her first story that she has written since high school and hopes it won't be the last. Tia wrote this story after losing a close friend in an air crash in Indonesia. She will be missed.

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November 2010 featured author interview with Sharanya Manivannan

Q. When did you first realize that you wanted to become a writer? And what are some of your inspirations?

I can't remember a time when I didn't love books, but I know I started to write when I was seven. Perhaps the main difference between me and anyone else who keeps a notebook at any point – and most of us do – is that I didn't stop. I also had a wide-eyed reverence for art. I meet young people these days who refuse to read or to learn and carry an insolent, envious chip on their shoulders, and I feel sad for them. I think I wrote "Spark" for young adults because I was thinking about myself at a certain age, and how hard it can be, and how true grace will enter your life only if you meet it halfway. I am certain now that more so than talent, it was humility and openness that brought me anywhere, and as long as I maintain the same, I'll somehow stay afloat in the new playing field I've found myself in during the past few years: the cutthroat world of minor success.

I'm inspired by a multitude of things. What hooks me is always a metaphor. For example, I've been reading quite a bit about astronomical phenomena, in relation to one of the manuscripts of poetry I'm working on at the moment, because someone had told me last year about the pulsar – the star imploding, emitting its desperate death song – and I felt that metaphor deep in my body and soul. I enjoy research, and there's this wonderful way in which whatever you need always finds you. I'm thrilled by how I make discoveries and connections.

Q. What is your writing process like? Do have any unusual habits when writing?

I'm one of the few professional writers I know who don't write every day; I refuse to write every day. That practice dilutes my work. I'm indolent, a believer in slowness, immersion; my focus is on being receptive in life, and rarely on producing output. As a result, I have demonic spurts of activity. When the writing comes, it comes 2500 words at a time, or a complete poem in a sitting. It took me a long time to accept that this is my process, that I cannot do Nanowrimo or Napowrimo, for example, but now I'm able to respect that, and take pleasure both in how it happens and what comes out of it.

Q. You grew up in both Sri Lanka and Malaysia. In what ways do you think having life experiences in several countries has shaped who you are personally and as a writer?

Dislocation is a profound psychological motif both in my life and my work. The thing with having lived in various places, that too through my childhood and formative years, is that several of those experiences were quite traumatic: there were false starts, there were dramatic wrenching-aparts, and somewhere all of them have come together in a set of

neuroses that certainly shapes my personality. My writing, however, has been blessed by this dislocation – and I use the word blessed in the double-edged way that differentiates it from plain luck – because I have a gift for being able to enter and exit situations at odd angles, a propensity for intensity even in briefness, and of course, a level of comfort in the position of outsider, observer, visitor, witness.

Q. Your first book of poetry, *Witchcraft*, was published in 2008. From where did you draw your inspiration in writing this collection?

Witchcraft was selected from a body of work that spanned seven years, and I would not have been able to do it if I hadn't put together a little handmade chapbook called *Iyari* a couple of years prior to that, which showed me that I was ready to structure a proper collection. The majority of the poems were written when I was living in Kuala Lumpur and deeply engaged in the artistic subculture of that time, particularly the period between 2005 and 2007. Those were creatively vibrant years for me. A great deal of that book was written for the voice, because there were so many readings at the time, and nothing gave me a bigger charge than performance.

Now, because I have not had that kind of vibrance in my life in the three years since I left KL, my work has necessarily become more insular. Readers who remember me as a poet of sass and sex and leopard print might be disappointed, because now I am a poet of the forest, a poet of exile and quietude. It is important to me to honour my evolution as an artist, even as the work becomes more esoteric.

Q. What is your most memorable experience about having lived or traveled in Southeast Asia?

When I lived in South East Asia, which was for a total of 17 years, I really lived there. It wasn't at all like my past three years in Chennai, where I am so uncomfortable that it's like sitting in a chair with a broken spring: even if you're only sitting in it for a little while, you are conscious of that entire duration. I'm deeply grateful for much of my time in South East Asia, as ugly as things got in the end. Toward the tail end of my life in that region, I had the chance to perform at the Borobudur temple, and that's an experience I cherish. In terms of travel, and in terms of what is possible from here on out, I keep turning to Indonesia. I've loved my trips there, and hope to make more in future, and I also want to explore Cambodia and Vietnam in particular. And always, I hope, Singapore, which to me has a little bit of magic, and more soul than anyone ever gives it credit for.

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"Spark"

She has blue butterflies in her hair, one above each of her ears, and a pendant that matches. She's waiting in Kinokuniya in a long-sleeved aquamarine lace blouse over jeans that need to be replaced; they have been wrung in the washing machine so many times that she has had to pin them at the waist to make them fit. She does not know it yet, but she will never be this happy again.

Earlier, through the enormous windows overlooking the lake, from the café on the bookstore's second floor, she had seen that sunset was at least an hour away. And sunset in KL is a slow spread, like a spill of honey, taking its time to smooth out. Today she has till 10.30pm. She's just like Cinderella, with gorgeous shoes to prove it.

He should be here soon, and when he arrives, they will take a taxi to Bukit Bintang. As she waits, she's reading what Henry Miller wrote of Anaïs Nin at seventeen. "*And so she exclaims: 'All my heart is singing with my longing for love'. She is in love with love, but not as a mere adolescent, not as a girl at seventeen, but as the embryonic artist that she is, the one who will fecundate the world with her love, the one who will cause suffering and strife because she loves too much...*" – and she thinks, with an intensity that makes her heart pound – *this is me, yes, this is me.*

In Bukit Bintang, they will meet their friends Ashraf and Fox for dinner, and then go to No Black Tie. Tonight there will be poetry and music: their friends will play, she will read, and when she goes back home she will stink of cigarette smoke and hope to god no one smells it. She isn't allowed to sleep over. She isn't even allowed to go to college yet, even though she finished school a year ago. This year is supposed to be a lacuna between graduating and giving in, growing up the way she's expected to, like bonsai in the shape of a woman (and how, and how, it thrills her to be a woman). But she knows that what she really is is a woman in the shape of water: neither contained nor captured. So this is what has happened: because she has no friends her age, because she cannot do the things every teenager does, her world distorts to accommodate the most strange wonderful people and things, people and things so far removed from anything she might have known otherwise. It will be a long time before her life resembles anything conventional, and even then, the memory of these years will precede everything she does, every place she enters, glimmering at the core of who she is, and who the world sees her to be.

The boyfriend is here. He taps her at the top of her head playfully, and she puts the book away and says she's ready to leave. She can't keep the smile off her face when she sees him.

They can't get a taxi right from outside KLCC because the boyfriend says the drivers who wait around there are categorically assholes, and they may as well walk a little bit and catch one down the road. So they do, crossing Jalan Ampang and hailing one down a minute away. When they've driven far enough for the twin towers to be seen at their full height,

she looks at them through her window and recalls with a smirk how her Singaporean aunt, when she'd gone shopping with them, had announced to her uncle upon seeing them, "The biggest erections in the world", and thought she wouldn't be able to understand. Yeah, right.

In Jalan Alor, they find Ashraf and Fox have already started eating. They pull up two more red plastic stools and join them. She orders cincau and char kuey teow without kerang. The boyfriend wants chee cheong fun and Milo ais. A cat runs under their table and stays there. She curls her toes inward.

"I don't think the gallery is the problem," Fox was gesticulating. "It's that bitch from the NGO."

"Which NGO?" She volunteers for one, a women's rights organization whose work she feels is very important.

"The one with dreadlocks la," he replies. "Don't know if she's your friend or not but she's bloody interfering."

She doesn't know who he's talking about but the gallery has been an issue on the scene for awhile. There aren't enough venues supporting independent art, and this one was about to close down, for reasons not too clear. People had a lot to say about this.

Their food arrives. She asks for a fork.

"You should learn how to eat with chopsticks," says the boyfriend. "They're so elegant."

She immediately files away using chopsticks with reading Proust, whom he is adamant is best read at her age. She's not planning to do either.

"In the end, though," says Ashraf. "It's all about who has the money to secure a place, and the balls to do something different with it."

"You need corporate sponsorship," the boyfriend says.

"Thus spake the yuppie!" laughs Fox. Nietzsche reference – she knows it.

"Not as long as he's got this bohemian beauty by his side," says Ashraf, and she blushes. He doesn't take his eyes off her as he lifts his bowl to his lips and swallows the last of his sup beehoon.

They walk to Jalan Nagasari. They're in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, a city that's like a box of jewels at night, and she loves the moment. Life in a real city: there's nothing like it. She won't live here forever, but this is what she will always associate with independence, anywhere in the world: the freedom to light her own cigarette at a window or on a street

and smoke it while looking at a skyline majestic against the dark of the night, without giving a damn who saw.

She's still getting used to being greeted with kisses. Cheek kisses, but still. It makes her feel shy. They enter the bar and Gloria, the photographer, does this and then rubs her face with her thumb, laughing, to wipe the lipstick off her skin. "Sorry darling, too enthusiastic". Last year, when someone had done the same, planting a big sloppy one on her ear when he'd seen her at a book launch, she thought at first that maybe he wasn't gay after all. But that was the other thing she loved about her new friends, all the shades and stripes they came in. Her best friend from school was still in the closet, except to her, and she had tried to drag him along to some of these events to encourage him.

"These are your friends, not mine," he had told her. They were drifting apart.

"You look lovely," someone says as they enter the bar. She thanks them, and means it. Another thing she is learning: that she is pretty, and that pretty girls take compliments graciously.

"What will you have to drink?" The boyfriend asks. "Nursing a mocktail as usual?"

She feels a little anger rise. "Iced tea."

"Okay. I'm having sangria. It's good here."

Li Zhen, who had tattoos on her neck, waves from the stage. She waves back. She can't believe the drummer has recognized her – she's so cool. And so sexy.

They're sound-checking. The lead singer burps into the mic and it reverberates, inciting laughter and expressions of disgust. Someone comes up to their table. "Hello, Lolita!" It's Surya, his famous afro flattened on one side, and the jibe was probably aimed at the boyfriend, whom he fist-bumps. Last year, when she'd worked at the bookstore the month after graduation, she had read Nabokov, resting it on her knee below the cash register. She thought it was pretty wicked that she hadn't just read *Lolita*, but its prequel too, *The Enchanter*. Considering how often this book was referenced around her lately, she mentioned it a lot.

She doesn't mind though. She likes the idea of herself as a dangerous child-woman. She has recently started to wear eyeliner.

Li Zhen's band ends their set. The bar has filled up quickly, and though she doesn't necessarily know everyone here, she's learnt most of their faces over the past few months. The night is organized by a good friend, Errol. She asks the boyfriend for the time. She doesn't wear a watch herself, because it clashes with her trinkets, but she has to keep an eye on it. Otherwise, as the boyfriend says, she might turn into a pumpkin.

The truth, according to her, is that she has nothing. She has no real money of her own. She has no prospects in terms of education, employment or going abroad. Sometimes she weeps until she is sick. Sometimes she presses sharp things into the flesh of her forearm

until there are cuts or indentations. She can go nowhere without having to lie first. This is all she can see for now: the nights of smoke and music a subterranean life, a secret, an accident – one of these days she will be found out, and that will be the end of her. The reality of things cloistered, terrifying, the only reality she sees.

But that's Pete Teo, troubadour laureate of the city, easing onto the bar stool with his guitar, adjusting his microphone, telling a joke to test it, and although she doesn't drink yet, he only has to strike his first few chords to get her body buzzing with the night's electricity. After his set, she will get a chance to go up there and read something, a new poem she has written with serious intent, and a couple of earlier pieces. Flo had put her last two poems in her zine, copies of which she leaves for free in unfussy shops. Maybe people are nice to her because she's sort of still a little girl, but maybe people are nice to her because she has something inside her that twinkles; even she can see it from time to time. She doesn't know it yet, but her future is full of nights like this – even if she is found out the way she fears, she will also be discovered. And later, though she cannot even imagine it yet, it's these nights she will miss, these nights she will try to recapture every time she steps onto a stage.

Bald Errol, the elf, his silver septum piercing glinting in the spotlight when he raises his head, calls her name. The audience claps, her friends whistle. She slides off her stool, pulls the hem of her top down, and tries not to look too excited as she takes her printed papers from her handbag, which she leaves with her boyfriend. Someone comes to adjust the mic to her height. She leans in. "Hi everybody..." she begins. She looks at the audience and can't see their faces, but they can see hers, the light catching the diamond in her nose, the euphoria in her eyes.

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"Hard to Let Go"

"And just how do you expect to support yourself? You don't know anybody there. Singapore is so big. It's not like Penang, you know? It's even bigger!"

"Yes mom. I know. It's big. It's scary. I'll be broke in a week. You told me all of this yesterday when you saw my train ticket. I didn't want to tell you at all because I knew you would overreact."

"Overreact? Of course I'm going to overreact. You are so young and innocent. The people there are kiasu and clever. They will take advantage of you. Such a nice boy. A place like that will eat you up. No. No. I cannot allow you to go. I will disown you if you go."

"No you won't. And don't say things like that."

"OK. I would never disown you. But you will be breaking my heart. You will be leaving me here all alone. Who will help me out around the house? Or run errands to the store for me. You know I have difficulty getting around."

"Mom, you have six children, four of whom live just minutes away. If you need anything, they can help you. Nothing will change here. Cik Adibah practically lives here anyway. You two don't even know when I am at home or out half the time you get so carried away with the neighborhood gossip. Think of it this way—with me in Singapore, I will have lots of exciting stories to tell you and you can share with everyone here."

"Oh, but that is the only thing I like about you moving there. The stories. I need you to stay close to me. I need to know that you are alright."

"Well, then why don't you come with me?"

"Good heavens no! I couldn't. Who would help your sisters look after the children before they come home from work? Who would keep this house tidy each day? And who would look after my garden out back?"

"See! You have so much going for you in your life here. But I do not. I need to explore a bit. Spread my wings and soar."

"You sound like a bird now."

"Mom! I'm being serious. I feel like the best years of my life are passing me by just sitting around here."

"But you have a good job at the cinema. You can watch all the movies you like. And what if I want to see a film? Now I will have to pay. You know I don't want to spend so much to buy movie tickets. And I would have to go alone now. Oooh!"

"Mom, you are overreacting again. In the two years and five months I have worked at the cinema, you never once went to see a movie, no matter how many times I tried to get you to go."

"Well, I was just busy those times."

"Every time?"

"Yes. Don't question me."

"Mom, do you really think I am happy here? I grew up in this town. I've never been allowed to travel. My friends have been to London already, and I can't even go to KL! Please, let me try my luck in Singapore. If I fail, then I will have failed on my own and doing something I truly wanted to do."

"Oh, I don't want you to fail. You would lose all your hard-earned money. Why don't you just stay here and buy a house, marry young just like your father and I did. I don't have enough grandchildren."

"Twelve."

"Twelve what?"

"Grandchildren. You have twelve grandchildren. That is not enough?"

"No, I have more room in my heart for another twelve easily."

"At that rate, you will have to register your house with the government as a youth recreational facility."

"Just don't be there for too long."

"Huh? You mean you will let me go?"

"No, I won't let you go. But when you go anyway, don't stay for too long. I don't want you to forget your own mother. And I don't want to be mired down with a head full of grey hairs before the next time I see you."

"You know I will come back for the holidays. Besides, we can keep in touch with Messenger or Skype."

“You know I don’t like that w-w-google stuff. It’s confusing.”

“Er, right. But it will be cheaper than calling...if you would only give it a try lah...”

“Oh! You are already planning not to call your own mother and you haven’t even left yet!”

“Mom! Don’t be so dramatic. I will call. But you need to promise to contact me. E-mail, maybe?”

“Oh...that hot man thing?”

“Eh, no mom. Hotmail. Don’t go on the hot man pages, ok?”

“You see? I am already confused. You know how long it took me just to learn how to send an sms to your mobile, don’t you?”

“Yes, mom. Well, it is OK if you do not want to try and contact me. I understand.”

“Oooh, no. I will try it. I will try it every day. You will see.”

“That sounds nice.”

“I promise.”

“I believe you.”

“Oh, I’m going to cry.”

“Mom? I love you.”

* * * * *

"Tanjung Resang, Malaysia's Best Kept Secret "

Peninsular Malaysia is a land of countless natural treasures. Living in neighboring Singapore, I've been lucky enough to have visited quite a few of the better known Malaysian spots: Pulau Tioman, Pulau Redang, Kuantan, Pulau Penang, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur—each a unique and memorable location in their own way.

But it's only when I ventured off the beaten track along the Malaysian East Coast recently that I was truly awe-struck by the raw natural splendor of the landscape, the immense variety of wildlife, and the kindhearted generous nature of the *orang kampung*, the village folk that live in this region.

In July, 2010, I took a few friends on a little road trip. Our objective was to traverse the southern state of Johor until we reached Mersing, a picturesque, yet bustling seaside town that gets its name from the Mersing River running through it. We'd been to Mersing on previous occasions; it is the de facto departure point to many of the popular holiday islands that dot the sea off its coast. This time though, after arriving in Mersing, we were feeling adventurous and just continued driving.

About 20 minutes after passing by Mersing, we turned off the main road onto a dusty rock-strewn track that was barely discernible against its jungle backdrop. A dozen or so miles on, the track came to an abrupt end, courtesy of a crystal-clear stream that ran across the horizon as far as the eye could see. Our options were simple; we could either turn back or take our chances with a dilapidated wooden bridge that spanned the stream in front of us.

The gamble paid off handsomely, because within minutes, we were cruising along a newly-constructed pristine road that appeared freshly gouged from the rainforest. I am not sure what compelled us to keep going, nor where we were, but we eventually stumbled upon Tanjung Resang, an area so stunning in its visual beauty that we instantly agreed that it is Malaysia's best kept secret.

The physical location of Tanjung Resang is like a natural retreat. Ensnared between an idyllic, almost endless stretch of beach on one side and a jagged, dense jungle canopy on the other, it breathes tranquility. Aficionados of local Malaysian cuisine who visit are in luck. Even though secluded, Tanjung Resang is not too far of a drive from the nearby resorts or mom-and-pop eateries. We enjoyed a range of mouth-watering, traditional dishes, including *nasi lemak*, *satay*, and *kueh*.

As nature lovers, we enjoyed Tanjung Resang's many hiking opportunities and the exotic flora and fauna. In the short time I was there, I saw snakes, monkeys, wild boars, huge flying foxes, eagles, and even a porcupine. I even spotted a pilot whale surfacing while we were paddling out at sea on our stand up paddleboards.

Though we did not try it ourselves, we took note that Tanjung Resang would be a great place for sailing and windsurfing during the November-February monsoon season. The 20-25 knot nor'easterlies that blow virtually non-stop would be a dream come true for advanced enthusiasts. Outside of this season, the more mild SE/SW winds are blocked by Tanjung Resang's terrain, creating ideal conditions for more recreational sailing, angling and scuba-diving. We knew that we would return to take advantage of all it had to offer.

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"Finding a Little Bit of Heaven in Sulawesi"

After dragging her luggage through two feet of snow from the airport's long-term parking lot to the international terminal, she was tired and her legs numb. But sitting in her seat, Judy could feel her feet thawing out already. The icy landscape outside the plane's tiny window gave her a moment to reflect on just how fortunate she was to be indoors. In fact this was going to be the last time she would see snow, at least, until her work permit expired two years from now.

"Are you flying to Los Angeles to visit family for the holidays? That's so good of you. Your mother will be so happy to see you. I bet she misses you."

"I'm sure she does miss me," Judy replied, pleased that the older couple sitting next to her felt like talking. It would help with passing the time. "But my mother lives in Toronto. I am just getting a connecting flight in L.A. I'm on my way to Indonesia to start a new research assignment."

"Oh, how horrible. That's no place for a young woman to go on her own. Haven't you heard? They have terrorists there!"

Judy had already been through a similar sort of disapproval from her parents. They were no doubt worried about her safety and did not want their only daughter to be so far from home. Still, it perturbed Judy and only made her more determined to go. She did not see Indonesia as a place of danger far from home. Rather, it was a land of excitement and adventure and new experiences, ones that she could only dream of in Canada.

Several hours later, Los Angeles seemed like a blur. Even though it was her first time in the iconic city, Judy had to hurry through the slow immigration and customs lines, grab her bags, and check in for her lengthy trans-Pacific flight. There was no time even to go to the toilets before boarding her plane. This would be the longest flight Judy had ever taken, but she came prepared, bringing plenty of reading material.

Being an overnight flight, Judy hoped to pass the time by sleeping. Her mind was racing with all of the excitement of a child on Christmas morning, though. Sleeping, even for a few hours, was simply not possible. Judy had hoped that the other passengers sitting next to her would be chatty, but they fell asleep just moments after the dinner trays were taken away. Besides, she had not heard them speaking in English since they sat down.

This worried Judy, wondering if she would be out of her element in Indonesia. After all, she did not speak anything other than English. But Judy just brushed off these fears, accepting that she may have some communication problems when she arrived and that was alright. It

would be part of the foreign experience, what drove her to fly halfway around the world in the first place.

Judy justified her trip further, having a one-sided debate in her mind. While she was interested to see the cities of the world's largest archipelagic nation, Judy's real focus and point of the trip was to venture far from cities and towns, into the deep recesses of the tropical rainforests and jungles. Animals. Exotic animals. That is what excited Judy the most. As a newly graduated zoologist, she had a lot of naïve dreams of discovering new species, perhaps even having one named after her. As the world became more interconnected and wildlife habitats were lost, the chances of finding new species were slim. Encouraged by recent and frequent discoveries in Indonesia, though, Judy took that as her best chance to discover the unknown.

Sulawesi was her destination. The large orchid-shaped island was a place of legend and mystery to most Westerners. In fact, its people served as the origins of the Boogeyman legends told by European sailors to their children, if they ever made it back home, that is. Even though Judy knew her work was solitary and admittedly dangerous because of the extreme isolation, she was not unnerved by those children's tales, now hundreds of years old. She was focused on her self-determined task.

Several meals and movies later, Judy started to feel tired. The monotony of sitting still on a trans-Pacific flight was finally starting to get to her. As her eyes began to glaze over and her eyelids felt heavy, she was startled into reality as the captain announced loudly and abruptly on the intercom that they would be landing in Taipei, Taiwan...yet another stopover.

Judy disembarked and stretched her legs. Her dry, bloodshot eyes and aching body made her feel as if she was experiencing a hangover of sorts. Thoughts quickly flashed through her mind...a relaxing cruise back home instead of a flight, stopping in Fiji as it crossed the Pacific...or maybe in the Maldives and the Greek Isles going the other direction altogether. Any cruise or return to Canada, however, was years away in Judy's mind. She had much work to do after she arrived.

Getting impatient and wanting to get back on the plane to continue her journey, Judy checked her tickets only to find that she would be getting back on the exact same plane. She sat in the waiting room as they cleaned the plane and refueled, letting her eyes rest shut while being careful not to fall asleep and miss her next flight. Judy suddenly jerked her whole body out of its slouched position. She had fallen asleep. The room was filled with people and an Asian couple she had recognized from her previous flight was standing next to her, unable to find empty seats in the waiting room. They seemed to be amused by her uncomfortable wakening. Checking her watch, Judy realized that she had only slept for less than two minutes.

After several more uncomfortable lapses in and out of consciousness, Judy jolted awake for the final time after hearing the boarding call for her flight. Her journey would continue. This flight would take her directly to Jakarta, Indonesia's capital. It was shorter than her

trans-Pacific flight, but still long enough to be uncomfortable, particularly for sitting in economy class with its cramped quarters. At least, she thought, there would be time to get a few hours of much-needed rest.

Judy found her seat, stowed her backpack above, and promptly fell asleep in her window seat. She slept through the safety procedures and the takeoff but was woken by the flight attendant serving breakfast. Annoyed but hungry, she grudgingly opened her seat-back table and mumbled her food and drink choice. It was then that she noticed her seat mates were the same couple that stood near her in the waiting room.

"Makan," the man said while smiling, indicating he was going to start eating his breakfast.

Judy finished her food quickly and fell back asleep before the tray was taken away. Her sleep only lasted a few minutes as the man next to her woke her up by tapping on her shoulder. Judy was, by that point, dreaming of the exotic animals of Sulawesi, and how they would all come to her as she sang to them like Snow White. The man apologized for disturbing her, but pointed out that he had spilled his water down her leg when it fell off his tray.

"Oh, don't worry about it," as she gave a fake smile and attempted to go back to sleep. "Miss, you will be cold. You should dry off. I'm very sorry."

"OK. Thanks for your concern. I'll be fine though. It was just a little bit of water. It won't hurt me."

"My husband is so clumsy. He would knock his own head off if it weren't attached to his body. Are you flying to Jakarta?"

Annoyed by the conversation as she was clearly trying to sleep, Judy started to panic, wondering why the woman would ask her if she was flying to Jakarta if they were on the same flight to Jakarta. Wasn't that obvious? Or was she on the wrong plane?

"Yes, I'm going to Jakarta. This is the flight to Jakarta, right?"

"Jakarta, yes. We are going home. The flight is so long. I can't wait to see my children. We have been on vacation in California. Nine days. I miss my children. How many children do you have? Do you miss them?"

Judy's annoyance turned to general confusion. Still confused over the flight destination question, Judy began to wonder what the question about children was all about. Did it mean she looked old enough to have a child, let alone children? Was it meant to imply that all women should forgo a career in favor of raising a family?

"A California vacation? That sounds nice. No, I do not have children. I'm not even married. I just finished my studies."

“Yes, you look so young. Soon you will marry and have children. Maybe an Indonesian man? I have a nephew who is single. Do you like to eat rice? White people don’t eat rice. Are your parents still alive?”

Again, Judy was confused by the line of questioning. It appeared that the woman would occasionally answer her own questions, oblivious to whether it was true or just a stereotype. Trying to gain control of the direction things were going in the conversation and avoid talking about marrying this woman’s nephew, Judy shared her excitement about travelling to Indonesia for the first time.

“Do you mean that you are travelling by yourself?”

“Well, yes. After all, nobody I know would be able to leave their lives behind for two years just to follow me around Indonesia. So I’m going solo.”

“Oh my! Well, you can stay with us. We live in Bogor. It is not far from Jakarta. And my nephew can show you around the city. He is a very good guide. He has shown many tourists around the city. Have you ever tried bakso? But he is not tall like you are. You don’t mind, do you?”

Judy reasoned that she was either too tired to understand the logic of this woman’s questioning or that communicating in Indonesia, even in English, would be harder than she imagined. Then again, maybe it was just this woman who was a bit off kilter.

“Actually, I am feeling cold. I think I will go to the lavatory and get some paper towels to dry off my leg.”

“I’m sorry for spilling on you.”

“My husband, you know, he can be so clumsy sometimes.”

Judy nodded her head as she squeezed past their seats, not wanting to start a new conversation. It looked like sleep, this time not by choice, was going to avoid her again. She considered looking for an empty seat to fall asleep in and evade the talkative couple, but it was a full flight. Judy lucked out, though, after eventually returning to her seat. They were both sleeping. That might have been the only time that Judy would be fortunate for having to wait in the long queue by the lavatory doors.

The flight entered some minor turbulence. Judy didn’t mind it, but she did worry that it would wake the couple up and the peculiar questioning would continue. Still, no matter how hard she tried, Judy could not get back to sleep. She pulled out her books, not interested so much in reading them as just looking at the pictures of nature that she would be experiencing upon arrival. The vibrant colors of the feathers and flowers set her imagination in motion. From the coral reefs to the rainforest canopy, she was heading into a rainbow of life of sorts.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen.” Was it still morning? Judy had no idea what the time was, having left Vancouver in the evening, but having the airlines serve her breakfast three times since then. Still, the captain’s voice indicated that they would be landing in Jakarta soon. She had finally made it. But she was not finished with her journey just yet. Jakarta was yet another stopover.

Judy had more time in Jakarta than she did in Los Angeles and Taipei between flights. Still, she had no desire to explore the city, let alone the airport. All she could think of at this point was boarding her next flight to Makassar, the largest city on the southern tip of Sulawesi. Judy noticed some artwork on the walls in the waiting room. It seemed that each waiting room used the traditional arts from a different province of the country as its decoration. Her waiting room was decorated with the masks of Central Java. Without much interest in socio-cultural studies or history, Judy did not appreciate the artistry or the stories behind these masks. All she could think about was rummaging through the forests in Sulawesi to find a new primate sub-species, or in the river beds looking for a distinct type of freshwater fish, or perhaps on the jungle floor, where she might find the droppings of a big cat.

Judy waited at the airport for what seemed like an eternity. She was tired–exhausted really–but there was nothing that would prevent her from boarding her final flight leg. There was no way she would try to get some sleep and risk missing her flight. The small turboprop plane pulled into the gate and instinctively passengers started to gather at the gate entrance.

Once on board, Judy realized just how small the plane actually was. There was room for three seats per row; Judy got her own seat on the plane’s left side. There were about 20 passengers in total and she took inventory of them as they fussed with their carry-on bags and made a big deal, it seemed, about just getting on the plane, sitting down, and buckling up. She was ready to get into the air.

The plane waited on the tarmac for about twenty minutes. There was some light rain at the airport, but it did not seem bad enough to cause delays. The takeoff, nevertheless, was smooth. Judy had heard that the smaller the plane, the bumpier the ride. A rollercoaster enthusiast, Judy did not mind the bumps and sudden drops. In fact, it made her even more excited. With every air pocket the plane hit, the passengers groaned. But Judy almost felt like shouting “Yippie!,” thoroughly enjoying the ride.

After a few hours in the air, the plane had cleared any stormy weather. For the first time in her nearly twenty-four-hour flight from Vancouver via Los Angeles, Taipei, and Jakarta, she peaked out of the window. Below was a blue sea, sparsely speckled with ships. Beneath the blue veneer, though, she knew that a whole new world existed, much like the one she would encounter in the green jungles of Sulawesi when she arrived.

Judy knew that this was the last flight she would take for a while, taking advantage of the road network on the mountainous island to get around to her research sites. She was

determined to enjoy the bumpy little plane as it brought her closer to her destination than she could have barely even imagined just months earlier.

“I am in Indonesia,” she whispered audibly, the excitement of the moment clear on her face.

The other passengers, however, did not share Judy’s excitement. They were almost green-faced with the nauseating bumps and dives the plane was making. Judy was in her own world of pleasure and excitement and what would be for her. Only, it was not to be...for any of them. As the plane’s two engines almost simultaneously cut off, the small little turboprop slowly arced into a nose dive down into the blue seas below. Through the side window of the plane, Judy caught a glimpse of what she imagined to be Sulawesi. With an all-encompassing look of excitement, surprise, amazement, and fear on her face, she gritted her teeth as the plane entered the water and broke up instantly from the impact. And Judy joined the paradisiacal world she longed for.