

# *A n a k S a s t r a*

## Issue 34

### Issue 34 Contents

#### *short fiction*

"In His Wake"

by Emilee Prado

#### *nonfiction*

"The Earth We Borrow: Lessons on Time and Life in Miri, Sarawak"

by Denali Sai Nalamalapu

"The Forest Canopy"

by Christina Yin

#### *poems*

"Versos Del Nido"

by Aiden Xiang

"Malaysian Monsoon"

by Ismim Putera

"Tunnel #5 ( \* )" and "Short Story, as Borobudur"

by Lawdenmarc Decamora

"I Miss the Palms"

by John C. Mannone

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## Contributor Bios

**Emilee Prado** is an emerging fiction writer who is currently earning her master's degree in creative writing through the University of Edinburgh. Emilee spent three years teaching English as a Second Language to students in Lopburi, Thailand. She has also traveled through Southeast Asia in Vietnam, Laos, and Malaysia.

[Denali Sai Nalamalapu](#) is an Indian American writer, artist, traveler, and environmentalist. She recently returned to her home on the northeast coast of America after spending ten months living in Miri, Malaysia on the island of Borneo. She spends a great deal of time thinking, conversing, and writing about human communities around the world and their relationship to their land. She hopes that a movement of thought towards our interconnectedness with nature will lead us to a critical global understanding of what must be done to combat anthropogenic climate change.

**Christina Yin** (Twitter: [@ChristinaYin13](#)) lives in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo with her husband and two German Shepherd-Labrador mixed-breed dogs, Dana and Scully. She celebrates life teaching and interacting with her students in the classroom and in creative writing, debate and green activities. Apart from reading and writing, she enjoys Skyping with her children who are studying in Glasgow and Iowa.

[Aiden Xiang](#) is a native Chinese poet born and raised on the edge of Tibetan Plateau. He taught himself to write and read in English. He holds an MA in literature from Tongji University in Shanghai, where he currently works and lives. Most of his English and Chinese-language poems have an Asian and/or Chinese theme and have been published in many online and offline magazines, most recently in *New English Review*, *Literary Shanghai*, *A Shanghai Poetry Zine* and *Eunoia Review*.

**Ismim Putera** comes from Sarawak, Malaysia, where he works as a medical doctor in the rural area of Pulau Brait. The beauty and tranquillity of Pulau Brait provides hope and inspiration to write poetry and express himself creatively. He enjoys reading fiction, drama and computer games.

**Lawdenmarc Decamora** is a Filipino poet and critic, who holds an MFA in creative writing and is presently completing his MA in literary and cultural studies. His poems and a few critical essays have been published in journals around the world, including the *Seattle*

*Review, Cordite Poetry Review, SAND Journal, Columbia Journal, and the Kartika Review.* He has received nominations for Best of the Net and the prestigious Pushcart Prize in the US. He teaches literature and humanities at the Royal and Pontifical University of Santo Tomas (UST) – the oldest existing Catholic university in Asia.

**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, TN.

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## **"In His Wake"**

by Emilee Prado

Wherever he goes clouds begin to form—not the cottony clouds that amass to line the sky, but dark clouds that skitter and writhe behind him. Sometimes they swarm like wriggling shadows and fill the footprints he leaves in the mud. Sometimes the clouds he raises send the village children bounding back up into their places in the cart or climbing atop the motorbike; sometimes they make people stomp or swat, shriek or flee.

It takes a few minutes for young women to notice the insects. It takes a few minutes for them to tear their eyes away from Somsak's expensive clothes and his handsome, youthful face.

So the story goes.

Amidst the idle talk of gossipmongers, those with a fondness for spiritual solutions have decided that it is a curse, or perhaps a village spirit that haunts the man. Others have concluded that it is not a ghost, but unusual—yet theoretically possible—pheromone activity that surrounds Somsak. However, no matter what the bystanders suppose, the story remains the same: Not long after Somsak passes through the jungle the insects gather in his wake.

Somsak pays no mind to the rustles in the brush. No matter what his surroundings, they mildly pass him by. Today he plods along, head bent and inattentive. It's as if he's simply following in a line of bovines on their saunter to fodder. He shows no change in pace as he wanders from the mucky earth up onto the ruggedly paved road; no change in pace as he approaches Net's restaurant.

Somsak would have taken the long way around—by driving like he usually does—but his shiny silver Benz is at the mechanic's. Something got into the engine. Again.

Although it's nearly dark, the corrugated metal sheets that make up the roof and three sides of the restaurant still radiate the heat of the day. The air is thick and heavy. The

one canvas wall is propped up and outward into a canopy showing that Net is open for business.

Somsak doesn't take off his shoes below the single wooden step. He sits at the counter and kicks his feet up. He brushes some dust off of the designer jeans he paid someone to go down and buy for him in the city. The soles of his feet are aimed down the row of empty wooden stools.

Somsak calls out, and a greeting of recognition returns from Net who is probably at the grill around the side of the partition. Net can be heard scrubbing at something metal with a wire brush. Somsak digs into the pocket of his shirt. He takes out the thin, roll-up cigarette and sticks it between his wet lips. It dangles there as he mutters something to himself under his breath.

He calls to Net, again. Net invites Somsak to get himself a beer.

Somsak does. He slides down off the stool and retrieves a bottle from the fridge. He sets the bottle on the counter. The rolled cigarette hangs from his mouth, unlit. The waiting is almost more substantial. The waiting leaves him with ideals to cling to.

Net finally trudges in, bringing along a rickety plastic fan. One of the fan blades is broken and the missing piece rattles around at the bottom of the cage. Net sets the thing down and begins to shuffle around the empty beer cases which he had stacked in front of the wall socket. Eventually, he gets the fan going and it settles into an uneven rhythm.

Somsak takes the unlit roll from his lips and tucks it next to his phone in his shirt pocket. He tells Net that he's going up to the lake to grill seafood and watch the women swim at the weekend. Somsak wonders if Net wants to join him. Net shrugs.

Somsak asks how business has been today. Net shrugs again.

Net picks up the beer from the counter and takes it back over to the fridge. He presses it down against the bottle-top remover on the fridge's door. Then, he fills two glasses with ice and beer.

The men sit quietly, not speaking, not moving except for glass to lips, or bottle to glass. Occasionally, they swat at the mosquitoes. Somsak sees that tiny drops of condensation transfer from the glass to Net's grey beard before they slowly disappear.

It's down to the suds of the bottle before any other sounds can be heard. Voices. They begin in the distance and slowly ascend to audible levels. They are female voices,

young, but womanly. Somsak gazes out at the road beyond the propped-up canvas. Net just keeps staring into his glass.

Somsak sees four girls: two are perched atop bicycles, and all are wearing university uniforms. The girls in the front peddle along leisurely, while those on the back let the heels of their shoes drag against the ground. Somsak mistakes one of the girls for Chompoo. It cannot be Chompoo though, because as the girls go by—all caught up in a world of private giggling—Somsak glimpses her mouth; it's full of straight, white teeth. He mutters something about the girl's skirt and then adds a few more words about all of those cream-whitened legs as the bicycles move out of sight.

Net stomps at a few cockroaches that poke up through the floorboards. Then he gets out another beer and tops up their glasses.

Eventually, Somsak remembers the rolled cigarette in his pocket and sticks it to his lips again. Somsak knows that Net will pretend not to notice that the musty tobacco smell will be interlaced with some green. He'll offer Net a few puffs and Net will be delighted. Somsak checks the grimy shelf next to the door for the lighter. Nothing but dust. He asks Net, who replies that he must have put the lighter somewhere after starting the grill. Somsak shrugs and climbs down from the stool. Before he ambles out the door, he puts down some money for the beer. It's a lot of money, as if he'd been drinking there all night.

Net slides the money into his pocket and goes back to staring at the glasses as they add more sweat to the little puddles already on the counter. After a few minutes some of the mosquitoes disappear.

At the little shop, Somsak leans against the jagged door frame as the shrivelled, old woman digs a lighter out of her display case. The woman's eyes wander to the crickets gathering in her doorway. Somsak exchanges two crisp bills for the lighter. Then, he puts the lighter with the roll in his pocket and walks on.

He passes by Net's again where he stops only to shout that he will return tomorrow.

Somsak's feet take him down the way that leads to Tukta's house.

The night they met, Tukta had come to Net's to collect her motorbike keys from her husband—Lee, or was it Tee? Somsak had been traipsing around outside about to light up when Tukta and the man began to argue. Somsak decided that he'd pretend to be too far away to notice anything instead of passing right next to them to go back into the restaurant.

Somsak heard her call the man a buffalo and a few other rude words. Having the gall to say those things got her slapped. The man then took the motorbike and peeled off. Somsak preoccupied himself with pretending to piss through the wire fence into the wall of jungle.

Tukta did have gall, because she walked right over to Somsak, looked down curiously, and then asked him for a ride to the market. After they had been talking for a minute or two, black beetles began to creep up through the machete-cut grass. Tutka, may the Blessed One reward her, did not scream. She did not run away. She simply shook the beetles from her feet and hurried over to an empty patch of dirt.

Somsak and Tukta did stop at the market that night, instead he took her in his Benz to a spot up by the lake. The two returned to that spot whenever circumstances allowed for most of last year.

From outside her gate now, Somsak can see that Tukta's lights are on. He doesn't see the motorbike. Somsak calls her a few times on the cell phone he gave her. She does not answer. He can hear voices inside the house, but it's probably just the children.

Disentranced now, and too bored to walk all the way to the brothel again, Somsak surrenders himself home to Pui, his wife who snores like a bullfrog.

When he arrives home, Somsak finds Pui standing over a steaming pot, stirring vigorously. The room reeks. Pui glances his way, then jerks her eyes back to the stove and demands to know where he's put his sleeping trousers. Somsak had forgotten she was doing this nonsense cleansing ritual tonight. He sinks down into a chair. He doesn't answer Pui right away because she continues speaking. She is scolding him for not leaving the trousers out like she had asked. Everything, including the pot and spoon, had been blessed in a lengthy ceremony today, but the trousers were nowhere to be found so he'd have to go to bed naked tonight. Somsak asks why she didn't just take another pair from his drawer. She snorts.

Pui frets, alternating between muttered words and silence for a while. Somsak eventually says that maybe he tossed the trousers over the line outside with his bath towel. She tells him to stir, marching over with the large wooden spoon outstretched. Somsak doesn't take it; he's busy carefully unbuttoning his shirt. Wet patches had appeared under his arms from all the walking, but no body odor had slipped through his carefully applied deodorant and cologne. He undoes each button slowly. Pui finally splats the spoon down on

the table and goes outside. Somsak sighs. He makes sure that the phone he was carrying is muted, then hides it. He tosses his shirt over a chair-back before picking up the spoon and going over to the pot. It is difficult to stir because the liquid in the pot is thick and sticky. It is like the tar he'd seen used on the road, but it's not black; it's a creamy, pale pink. The smell coming from it is strange, like old fruit and cat piss. He scowls. The fumes make his eyes water and his nose run.

Pui returns with the trousers and pulls shut the mosquito netting back over the closed door. Then, she goes into the bedroom and returns with anything Somsak's ever slept in. She drops it all into the bucket of dirty dish water and pushes it down. So he won't be tempted, she says. She won't have him ruining this chance to rid him of his filth, she says.

With a sudden shriek Pui snatches up a broom and goes at Somsak's feet with it. He protests angrily, recoiling from the strokes although the grass bristles are not abrasive on his skin. Pui chases after the cockroaches until they scurry under the back door. She shoves the towel more securely into the narrow gap.

Somsak festers in silence.

It's not long before Pui has Somsak stripped down naked in the kitchen. He glowers as she applies the pink tar to his face and chest. Using both her hands, she smears the sticky substance onto his arms and then his back. Somsak can feel the warm sludge cooling and fixes his face in an expression of annoyance and disgust. His eyes continue to water. He wipes his nose on the back of his hand, but only ends up smearing more tar up his nostrils. As Pui slops on more tar, he quickly moves his hands down to shield himself, but Pui moves them aside.

Eventually, Pui has him covered: Every bit of skin and even his hair. The smell fades a little as his pink tar coating cools and becomes tacky. Pui washes her hands in the bucket holding his sleeping clothes. She tells him that she is going to bed now and that she has already laid down a large board over his area so that he won't ruin the sheets. He's not to wash until morning.

Somsak just stands there for a minute. Finally, he picks up the shirt he was wearing earlier and goes outside. His ass makes a splatting sound against the plastic chair. He sits



there naked, covered in sludge, grumbling to himself until he is able to get the rolled cigarette and lighter out of the shirt's pocket.

It's not long before he can hear Pui's frog-like snoring coming from inside.

Somsak carefully puts the cigarette in his mouth. Striking the lighter takes a few tries with his tar-covered fingers, but eventually he manages. The air is thick with humidity that even without the tar he probably wouldn't feel naked, but there is still no rain. He blows out a plume of smoke and it hangs there as if trapped.

There is a tickling sensation and he ignores it for as long as he can, but suddenly he swats at his leg and his palm lands with a sticky smack. He lifts his hand to the light of the tiny solar garden lamp and sees it covered in small black specks. Leading off to his right he can see what looks like the rest of the colony moving as one thick black line toward him and then up and over the other ants as they get stuck in the tar. Somsak decides that the sludge is useless. He's not going to wear it all night.

Somsak takes a few more puffs from his cigarette and the quiet haze settles into his mind. He goes over to the hose and turns the nozzle. The cigarette grows small and he spits it into the water. He spends a half-hour wiping the pink goo from his hair and body. It runs in little streams down the hill toward the river.

Somsak turns off the hose and tosses it aside. He returns to the house and dries off with a towel. He pulls on the boxers and jeans he was wearing earlier. Somsak moves the board and lays down on the bed, but he gets up again to toss a sheet of mosquito netting over Pui's snoring figure before he sinks into his own deep sleep.

A few days go by. Somsak comes home to find a series of angry messages on his secret phone. Tutka wants to know, among other things, why he doesn't love her anymore. He hides the phone as Pui's shouts come from the kitchen. She says that if those same tenants over in the blue house don't bring by the rent today, Somsak should charge them extra for being late. Somsak climbs out the bedroom window. He'll get his car back tomorrow, but tonight he'll have to go out on foot again. He trudges down to the river. He takes off his shoes and socks, rolls up his suit trousers, and wades in up to his knees. Most of the insects wait until he emerges.

Somsak just stands there. The river saunters along, slow-flowing because it never did rain. Maybe he doesn't love Tutka anymore. Maybe he never did. Anyhow, he's tired of

wasting his time on buying her things. He pictures all of their pretty faces in the current. He thinks about Chompoo and the girl with the straight teeth who looked like Chompoo. He decides to go to Net's and wait to see if those bicycles will pass by again.

As Somsak climbs up the river bank, fleas collect on his legs. He has to stop to brush them off before he can put his socks and shoes back on. As he walks the winding dirt path, Somsak pays no mind to the rustles in the brush. No matter what his surroundings, they mildly pass him by. He keeps on plodding along. His stomach—he realizes—is empty and calling for spicy pork. He'll ask Net to fix him some while he waits for those cream-whitened legs. Somsak continues down the path while not far behind him blow flies gather in his wake.

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## **“The Earth We Borrow: Lessons on Time and Life in Miri, Sarawak”**

by Denali Sai Nalamalapu

The jungle on Borneo is boastfully alive. Its green limbs delight in their tangle, arms dancing to the steady pattern of rain, fingers of low-lying ferns tapping the earth musically as raindrops fall onto them. There is too much for my eyes to comprehend. I look far up, into the vibrant green canopy formed by centuries of growth. I look down to my feet that are following the undulating hills cushioned by centuries of death, decay, and new growth. This jungle never ceases in its movement. My path is shared with a march of tiny to large, red to black ants. My ears mark the chorus of forest beings - the chirps, the flutters, and rustles. My skin matches the rich humidity, dripping slow, fat beads of sweat down my body.

The jungle of Sarawak flows seamlessly into the South China Sea, whose muddled waves hurry to rest upon the finely sanded esplanades. The sea is the peculiar temperature of bath water. While comforting, it retains the sweat that soaks my body. From where I stand, the reach of the sea appears endless. Turning to my right, I see the mansions of Miri gazing down from the high hilled thrones they sit upon. To my left, I see alternating patterns of beach to jungle. I fix my feet in the sand, however, the waves do not invite me to stay. The sand closes in around my feet and the waves rock me from side to side. If I remain in one place for too long, the sea's micro-minions, sea fleas, eat at my flesh. Their tiny, sporadic stinging molests me until I relent and flee their beach-wide monopoly. It is only at sunset that I have a reason to remain stubborn in my occupation. There is no sunset I have witnessed as commanding as the sunset over Miri. The pink is fiery and consumes any matter of colors that might stand in its way. The indigo is subtler, yet still formidable. It has withstood centuries of pink demanding all glory and knows how to stand its ground. The orange and yellow intertwine and circle around the sun, seeking refuge in its undeniably central positioning.

Deep in the jungles of Sarawak, the chase of life reminds me to be humble. Centuries of towering growth and forest floor buildup represent how many creatures have come

before me and how many will follow me. As I bear witness to the brilliance of green, red, orange, and brown, I nurture my sense of gratitude for the present moment. This essay catalogues my growth and learnings on humans' relationships to the environment. As an aspiring eco-feminist, I function in the world as a vessel for knowledge and insight on how to form a more just, empathetic, and knowledgeable human society. The ten months I spent living on the west coast of Borneo, in the city of Miri, informed my understanding of community, education, and environmentalism. Time spent exploring the Sarawak jungle, in the classroom with my students and fellow teachers, and engaging with my community in Miri has deepened my understanding of the complex myriad of problems that trouble today's society, including deforestation, environmental education, and economic sustainability.

Having had arrived in this country the daughter of a four-seasoned land, I had only the words of my favorite Southeast Asian authors to imagine daily life in this humid nation. The seasonlessness fascinated me - a year without the turning of winter to spring, spring to summer, and summer to autumn predicted a passage of time different from that I was accustomed to. In my experience, life in northern lands requires attention to the season's particularities, and thus a certain discipline and precision. In order to survive a Northeast American winter, one must be born of hardy skin and skillful hand. This hypothesizing proved to be true. Barring the minute differences in the dampness and dryness of days, the consistent humid weather translated to a relaxation of time. What first felt like an exasperating inevitability of time lost - impatience in winding grocery store lines, uncertainty over bus and train departures, boredom during unstated school assembly duration periods - evolved to become a new pace of life in my mind. As I relaxed my Northeastern rigidity, I was able to fall into stride with my surroundings and use the time to observe the interactions and landscapes. My favorite realization of this was in the seeming endlessness of daily tea breaks.

Tea breaks took place in the far right corner of the "teacher's room" where an unassuming square table sat. It was tacked onto long rows of rectangular teachers' desks. This table was a notable irregularity in the layout of the room, creating an L-junction in an otherwise tidy line of desks. However due to its strategic positioning in the back of the room, the small table was more or less able to keep to itself. A ring of slightly broken, well-

worn blue chairs of varying models were tucked into the table. Several of their wheels had stopped working, their backs collapsed, and their upholstery faded – a faction of discards. In the center of the table was a collection of miscellaneous items: a jar of Bario pineapple jam, three large, bright yellow tins of Jacob’s crackers, a couple cans of sardines, packets of Lipton black tea, a bottle of spicy soy sauce, and three large, lidded glass bowls of homemade Iban food.

Over the ten months I was at the local secondary school, I ultimately spent as many, if not more, hours at this table as I did at my own desk. This table became synonymous with community. There were seven formidable, dedicated, and loving women that sustained community around this table. The leader of the table was the most senior member of the English panel. She had tight curly hair, thick rectangular glasses, and a jolly stomach. Her eyes could turn instantaneously from laughing radiance to omniscient hawk-eyes - a sign of her mastery of teaching. Through decades of teaching and living, she had culled far-reaching wisdoms. This was recognized by the entire school and earned her an upheld position not only as the leader of the square table I speak of, but, unofficially, of the institution at large. At times, her boisterous voice could be heard from hallways away, but just as often she could be found speaking in hushed tones with an advice-seeking colleague or student.

Fellow English teachers and establishment members included a stout, freckled raconteur from the Kelabit tribe of the Bario Highlands; a petite woman of few words and many opinions of the Orang Ulu tribe; an equally petite, spritely, and contagiously youthful woman of the Iban tribe; a food-loving, at times world weary woman also of the Iban tribe; and an energetic, perfectionist of Chinese descent. A wondrously creative teacher from the arts department and a studious, devoutly Christian member of the Bahasa Melayu language department made up the remainder of the group. Together, they were the self-titled “Piranhas”: passionate about food and protecting one another.

These women were to become my family at school. The immediacy of their welcome and generosity drew me to spend the majority of my free hours at the table with them, sipping tea and snacking on biscuits or fruit from their villages. During days when I was particularly busy with projects or lesson planning, I would hear my name called from the far right table of the teacher’s room, “*Den-aliiii, makan, minum!*” The simple honor of being

invited to share a drink or snack with them always compelled me to accept. Each member of the table spoke at least three languages, and although most were English teachers, conversations were often held in Bahasa Melayu or Iban. This meant that there were days when much of what was said was lost on me. I understand this an inevitability of being a foreigner and was content in looking out the window on to the flowering, sunny school grounds or quietly inquiring of a seat mate what had been said.

Ample emotional space was given to stress, grief, joy, and frustration at the table, making it a constant space of warmth and stability. I grew to know each individual member of the small food-bonded community and their tangential friends by sitting and listening to stories told and emotions relayed, asking questions or for translations when necessary. It was at once a place of boisterous laughter, content, quiet company, and catharsis. I maintained a sense of gratitude for being invited to spend time in that corner surrounded by such wise and vivacious women. It only occasionally distracted me from the work I left unattended on my desk. But that seemed to be the rhythm of things. Everything got done, of course, but most often when it was destined to get done and not any sooner.

As the days passed and the seasonal monolith became clear, projects and lessons also merged, organically flowing from one to the next. At one point during a particularly heavy streak of monsoon rain, I inquired of a teacher a question informed by time spent living on the Subcontinent, only a sea away, "Miss, is this considered to be monsoon season?" She preceded her response with a tinkle of laughter, "Monsoon season? What of monsoon season? We do not have seasons. We simply have days. Some days have sun. Some have rain. Some have both." Recognizing the silly ignorance of my inquiry, we laughed together. I reflected on my own four-seasoned reality and how much it tended to inform my days: how I dressed, my mood, my chosen pleasantries, and my meals. During my time living in Miri, I recognized a certain flexibility ingrained in routine. Sometimes rain was going to pour buckets from the sky down onto you. The streets might be flooded to your knees and your basement might wallow in the mess of it all. Other times the sun would scream so defiantly that your face cowers and peels off in layers. Most regularly the rain would provide relief from the sun and the sun would provide relief from the rain, for one very rarely stayed without the other stealing the spotlight away. That conversation with my fellow teacher showed me that in order to understand the way of life here, I would have to

work to dismantle my own preconceived notions - however innocuous they may seem. Entering this space with my own fixed vocabulary would only impede my learning. By maintaining a sense of adaptability and actively listening, I found I was able to take in the mindset of those around me.

In another instance of my foreignness, a joke at the table began to revolve around the questions I would ask as to the cardinal direction of different destinations in Malaysia. Growing up on the outskirts of the Maine woods, cardinal directions were sold to us from a young age as instrumental to not only navigation, but to survival. Questions such as “How far north is Bario from Mulu?” or “How far south is Mukah from Bintulu?” were answered by bewildered eyes and vague responses that they were a couple hours drive in some direction. My fellow teachers would laugh and ask, “How far is the soy sauce from the ketchup bottle? Is my toe east of my nose?” This reframing of my physical positioning and proximity to things struck me as a result of directions being more fluid than that I was used to. This fluidity was due to several realities. In part, it was because of the quality of rural roads. While the infrastructure is rapidly improving, the tumultuous condition of many roads on Malaysian Borneo led to an uncertainty in arrival time. Oftentimes the speed of travel depended on when it had rained last, as landslides and dangerously slick dirt required vigilance. On larger roads, huge lorries, often transporting palm oil fruit, tottered along unhurriedly. It was all too common to get stuck behind several of these beasts and slow to match their lazy pace of 50 km/h. Additionally, the inevitably unhurried, hour-to-two-long departure production added time. This could consist of a myriad of last minute tasks - finishing up meals to take on the road, packing a rice cooker that might come in handy, resituating the trunk’s contents. What might have been a two hour drive south on I-95, became something else entirely. Cardinal directions had an irrelevancy in the lives of my community members that was based in a different understanding of time. Time, immersed in the tropics of Borneo, carried different weight, reminding me once more that it is but a construct created by our race in order to grasp the world we live in. What we do with our time is ultimately subject to the individual but is also heavily shaped and buttressed by the communities that raise us.

The hours I spent in the jungle of Borneo was to my community a bit of a mystery and assuredly an anomaly. Miri is a city ringed by palm oil plantations as far as the eye can

see and consisting of shopping mall complexes, bustling restaurants, and sprawling suburbia. Most people I met would rarely opt to wander in the AC-less, roofless, security-less outdoors. Many of them had grown up in this humid, tropical city. While they came from remote villages anywhere from one hour to twelve hours out of the city and undoubtedly valued the land of their island – lionizing its hornbills and rafflesia flowers – years in the city had tempered them to urbanized life. Thus, my treks were cushioned by concerns about my safety, sanity, and motivation.

The island of Borneo, located about 1,000 kilometers from Peninsular Malaysia, is deleteriously misunderstood by many outsiders. It has been misrepresented for decades as an isolated, outmoded land run amuck with headhunters and orangutans. You only have to cross the sea to the Peninsula to hear rumors of people living in trees and foraging the land. My fellow teachers shared many stories with me about trips to the eleven peninsular states where they were peppered with questions about their “primitive” lifestyle in the rainforest canopy. Of course the reality is that much of the island is well developed, complete with five-star hotels, suburbs, supermarkets, etc. A majority of the population in Sarawak has relocated in the last decade to its four main cities. While elders and caretakers still reside in the interior, running water and electricity allow them to enjoy the same luxuries as those on the Peninsula. Much of the Bornean rainforest has disappeared at the mercy of palm oil plantations, open burning, deforestation, and other human inflicted traumas. It’s not a land that stands to be romanticized in the primordial, for it is wholly modern in its century-old beauty and its modern troubles.

One Friday afternoon I stayed behind chatting to students after English speaking workshop as they trickled out of the room, headed home to enjoy a weekend full of glorious “nothing.” One of my most vivacious and chatty students remained after everyone had left, perching on the table, several seats over from where I was sitting. This positional overturn (him on the table, me in a chair) of the conventional student-teacher power structure is a warming result of my dual relationship with many of my students, as both a teacher and an equal. Our conversation led us to his aspirations and passions, “Miss, I want to fight for this land. I want to care for it when no one else is. I don’t know how to do that, but I want to find a way. But my father, I argue with him. He works for the oil palm plantation. He works for ruining our land. But he tells me that I don’t know matters of money. He tells me it is for me.



But I feel confused because if my jungle is not there than how can it be good for me?" He was full of admirable passion and insight into a pernicious situation I had only read about before arriving here. My student's words struck me as paralyzingly complex, yet coupled with the undeniable hope. He looked around him and saw a far-reaching, messy environmental and socioeconomic reality. In recognizing this, he had resolved that the most effective path was to focus on his education, particularly in the sciences (aside from physics, which he held in zealous contempt). He maintained his ranking in the top class of his form and held conversations with his father about the implications of palm oil. He also educated himself in intersectional matters, such as the marginalization of minorities, indigenous rights, and LGBTQ+ rights, not only in his own homeland but around the world. In his seventeen years of life he had realized much about the world and its sorrows. And, yet, he was not going to give up.

My conversation with this student and those that would follow allowed me to complicate my understanding of environmental degradation at the hands of crude oil and palm oil in my adopted city of Miri. Later, I would learn just how lucrative an industry palm oil is - one student sharing with me that 45 cents could be made from each fruit. The implications of these 45 cents were realized as I spent time living in the city the industry's success impacted. I understood what such a rapidly profitable product meant in terms of a family's economic stability, as it was my students, fellow teachers, and their families who were involved.

As I gathered insight outside the classroom, I chose to spend more time during my classes discussing humans' relationships with the environment and studying its history and current state. This brought to light varied levels of understanding, passion, and interest. It gave me insight into how this young generation of Sarawakians related, or didn't relate, to their jungles, caves, and bodies of water. This dual understanding was a meditative, collaborative learning experience that has deepened my understanding of socioenvironmental concerns in an important way. I now have a better understanding of what it looks like when a society confronts an undeniably lucrative, dangerous industry: the histories that lead up to the investment, the mentality behind the commitment, and the impact when the production takes effect.

The Earth will take what change comes with the grace of inevitability. Our impact on water and land bodies will grab hold and shift them immutably without consent. It is they that will continue onward, accepting the implications. It is for our sake that we protect our homelands, as we cannot survive without them. It is our bodies and our consciences that are most vulnerable. Every morning on my walk to school, I would enter the school gates, wave to the security guards, walk through the archway that announced my welcome onto the grounds, and climb a small set of stairs that read "We do not inherit our Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." As I continue my journey to imagine and further a society that is more just and aware than our current one, I will regard this quotation as a symbol of all the lessons I have learned in my time in Miri, Sarawak on the island of Borneo.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“The Forest Canopy”**

by Christina Yin

A baby long-tailed macaque scampers across the path and gives a little jump into her mother’s arms. With the baby clinging with her face against her belly, the mother leaps onto a tree and climbs upwards, pausing only to glance at me once before springing onto a branch that stretches out to a neighbouring tree. I can hardly follow their progress through the trees. There’s a glimpse of a tuft of hair and a whisk of a tail as the branches bob up and down, leaves rustling.

And then they’re gone.

Looking up, I see just the canopy of branches and leaves etched against the sky. Though it’s early in the morning, I can’t stare for too long at the criss-cross of brown and green patterns overhead as the sun’s rays are beating down hard. The branches and leaves shimmer and shake a little. Initially I think it might be monkeys shaking the branches, but it’s my eyes. I can’t stop the tears and look down to hide them from the runners coming in the other direction.

It’s a Saturday morning so there are many visitors to the urban park near our house in Taman Stutong Indah. I had slowed down to watch the baby long-tailed macaque and its mother, and now, I can hear the brisk footsteps of the serious fitness walkers and the voices of the more leisurely weekend visitors. Coming toward me is a young man in running gear. He lopes past me gracefully while just behind him comes the long-distance runner whose sneakers barely seem to skim over the ground. I pick up my speed and stride on quickly. I don’t want to leave the chance for someone behind me to pause to chat or look at me.

I walk quickly and keep well ahead of the recreational walkers while the runners speed past. I look at the path and avoid the little bumps and the fallen leaves that are slick from last night’s rain. As the path curves, the forest looms up on both sides. There’s nothing

but trees, ferns, little puddles of red stained water and the familiar buzz of cicadas. I remember walking here with you girls. Your father told you about the monkeys.

“Don’t look at them straight in the eyes. They can be aggressive.”

That day, we heard the organ playing and the singing from the chapel from the other side of the urban park. This mini forest reserve has a chapel on one side, a mosque across the main road on the other and, depending on the time, we can hear the call to prayer or the hymns. The chapel is simple, without stained-glass windows or even fixed pews. Earlier that year on Good Friday while we were sitting outside under a makeshift canopy to shield us from the sun, the faithful spilled out into the front porch and on the grassy side of the building.

Much later, we saw you off, one by one, to your new lives studying away from home. You are far away now, living your own lives. Kuching, Sarawak, Borneo, Malaysia – all must seem very alien to you. It has been some time since you’ve come home. Life is full and busy for you: classes, labs, placements and surgeries, dance practice, workshops, performances. Your father tells me we can visit you, enjoy you and your new lives. This is the way it’s supposed to be. We raised independent girls, and we should be happy about it. Yes, I am. You are strong and able to look after yourselves. You will be fine. We will be fine.

I walk faster now, as fast as I can. I’m not a runner like your father. But I can walk fast, and I never stroll. I turn the corner, and there he is. He’s finished his run and is meeting me midway along the long path. We aren’t alone, his eyes say. We have each other. It’s true, I think and smile reflectively. He turns around, and we hold hands so we can continue the walk together. I shade my eyes as I look up at the forest canopy. The leaves and branches are sway gently. The monkeys again, I guess. Or maybe the birds? Then I see who it is. It’s an adult long-tailed macaque. She’s perched alone on a branch, sharp-eyed and alert. The young one is nowhere in sight. As we move closer, she glances at us, looks all around, and then leaps onto another branch, then another. And in a moment, she’s gone. She’s moved on. The branches sway and the leaves rustle. Then they’re still, but not for long.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Versos Del Nido”**

by Aiden Xiang

### **I.**

This jagged coast,

old and quiet

and velvety

a star-lit sky;

smooth shadows

the color of a raven

flow

on a numb horizon

but glistens

the milky-way.

At the end of the shoreline,

dims

a lighthouse,

ominously yellow,

beneath it,

festive huts

Where men hide

in dreams.

There dogs bark

and a lonesome owl.

Soon a rosemary morning.

The screeching sound

of a car,

lost

to a thick patch of palm trees.

Far off the road,

a half-built structure

looms out,

and trembles

the salty air.

The sea,

a playful boy,

white fingers

on a damp beach,

giggles,

runs away,

shouts back,

provocatively,

and returns;  
inside his leaden cloak,  
    hidden gifts.

And the wind  
    in the woods...

## **II.**

And the wind  
    in the woods,  
No burgeoning red  
of a late autumn.  
but green like the fern,  
    almost eternal.

The sun  
    showering sparks;  
A white egret  
on a low-hanging sky.

In the embracing waves  
of the sea,  
Blue El Nido,  
A hundred boats adrift,  
A hundred swarthy faces,

A hundred commercial boards

exotic

on a street speaking little English.

A hundred coconut trees,

A hundred shapes of seashells,

A hundred still blooming flowers

quiet

on the sand soft as milk.

I'm one of many

unworthy tourists

walking into a tropical

bliss,

lotophagi,

黃泉,

no time and space

saved

when a boy comes running,

his voice

grey

in a land of many colors;

his words,

in Tagalog,



meaning home.

### III.

I bury myself

In your sand,

the damp breath

of an ancient place

seeps through me,

and freezes my bones.

Your waves, equally cold

from the lagoon deep

in the heart of islands,

messages written and re-written

on the beach—

words without meanings,

broken images,

away

with the ruthless hands

of the sea,

leaving behind an empty land

where my body lies

like the dirty root

of a dahlia— my life !

a stranger looking for

an open door,  
shouldering the burden  
of thirty wasted summers,  
parched,  
bewildered,  
lost.

then arrived at your shore.

O El Nido  
take me in!  
give me life

of a pebble,  
give me hardness,  
overheat,  
ice;

use me

against the corroding wind,

drown me

in the overpowering tide;

pick me up

from this sandy ground,

toss me

into the ocean,

let me fall,

even without a sound;  
the air shall know my worth.

Nowhere better

than the bottom ends  
of the sea,

dark places,

free from the grating noise

of the world.

Let it be my journey,

not my end,

gift me with death

so I can rise up

in the morning

and walk into the night,

proudly,

dreaming a long dream.

I'm all water.

I'm all earth.

I'm the past.

I'm the present.

I'm no future.

I'm an eternal to-be.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Malaysian Monsoon”**

by Ismim Putera

'There's the monsoon! There's the monsoon! '  
He is leading his troops from dawn to noon,  
He scoops the South China Sea fast and full,  
Mixing the water and wind in one typhoon,  
The echoes are encrypted in the Peninsula sand dunes,  
As the Nusantara folklores predicted it soon,  
No *jampi* runes to protect from its doom!

The sky hangs and drops strands of flashing light,  
Linking the mighty heaven and Borneo earth tight,  
The awakened Kinabalu Mountain trembles in fright,  
Tropical bullets shoot the rainforest and scatter apart,  
The kenyalang birds will hide in the Niah Cave tonight,  
There will be flood, marching like the mighty knights,  
And it will drench all humans and houses out of sight!

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Tunnel #5 ( \* )”**

by Lawdenmarc Decamora

*I change shapes just to hide in this place  
But I'm still, I'm still an animal.*  
- Mike Snow

Like Badang and the Singapore Stone of long ago  
I begin to fill up this hole spotted selflessly  
on this avenue with something, something.  
Boys and girls play together seeking  
their form hiding in dark alleys,  
four by four they come running, running  
to see the eyes of somebody, of the myth  
of madness burning up history that slips their vision.

What is this hole that tunnels above the roofs  
of our brain? Animal love that mothers of the world  
nourish, nurture, nurse... so we can feel  
the future to not make us think so folded, folded!  
For one, let's not confuse the hole  
to be the perfect circle or that 70s radio blasting  
Girls just wanna have fun in the open city, city.  
Let us think of it as fever dream coming  
alive in the doorway, or as rain on the doorstep.

But there's neither a hole nor more holes  
to see now, like some days wanting, wanting  
God's love to caress the words  
we can't afford to say. A shape, a modern

shape speaking to me in the face. Sometimes  
I'd like to say it's this shape that speaks  
the language of love, the strange interlude  
in a movie that keeps repeating, repeating  
in the shore that shifts the character  
of our inner flowering shapes.

Sometimes I'd just like to watch how the sun  
changes the shape of tomorrow  
as if grace, as if mystery in the appearance  
of Badang, the legendary strongman of sampan  
memories. And I would simply like to ask  
how mother and father and brother and sister  
offer some flowers to the rest of religion,  
how they pray for my job not to grasshop  
like the sight of litmus changeling, changeling.  
Maybe I just miss them so much,  
with each the shape of ( \* ).

## **“Short Story, as Borobudur”**

by Lawdenmarc Decamora

I've found a reason to live. Yellow sky  
bright shores. The theory sleeps between religion's  
porcelain ghosts & inner Sastra,  
& your seemingly  
neurotic connection to the plot  
sabotaged by the night's iridescent fingers.  
Hands of your characters' hair are  
a wisp in this solitude's picaresque,  
keeping shiny the stupas, beautiful as science  
though the birth of the hero can never be  
prehistoric Java, claiming the lost narrative  
of memory. Brittle aura of bones  
over the unsettling tear & this is  
to complicate the scenes  
from a horoscopic point of view.  
I've found the signs in a jar: heart lotuses,  
synecdoche. Flowers of the intricate past,  
I've brought them up to the altar  
with or without a conclusive epiphany,  
a conflict so indistinct as a star  
milked for its nirvana, for the riddling  
tales it tells right from the beginning,  
middle & end. The setting seems very patient.  
So what is chronologically cotton-bound  
may not be novel, physically circling  
the confessional & the divine

to escape the wayside of love, of this story  
shuddering before us like an archipelago.



\* \* \* \* \*

## **“I Miss the Palms”**

by John C. Mannone

its soft hush of leaves

by the sea

The cool

swish of waves

lapping my back

The offshore breeze

washing over me,

mixing with warm beach air—

ribbons of wind

Your long

sun-spilt hair fluttering on my face

The silk of your suntanned legs

That salty

sun, broken into sparkles

in the surf

The smell of brine

in a pot of clams

that we raked free from sand

in the tide's ebb

The whir  
of a spinning reel,  
the break-splash of ocean  
fish—pompano  
emerging from its emerald world

The taste of your lips—  
a rare pearl  
from a melo melo shell

that I put to my ear  
for whispers from the sea—  
that hollow echo

of your name.