

Anak Sastra, Issue 7

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Billy T. Antonio was born in San Carlos City, Pangasinan, Philippines, and is a graduate student at the Urdaneta City University. He served as a fellow for fiction at the 44th U.P. National Writers Summer Workshop in Baguio City. His short story, "The Kite," has been broadcast on 4EB-FM, 98.1, Brisbane, Australia. His haiku poems have been named among the best haiku of the 1st International Wilderness Haiku Contest of 2011 by the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and given honorable mention in the 13th Annual Mainichi Haiku Contest (International Category) in 2009. He has contributed fiction and poetry to the *New Mexico Wilderness Alliance Wild Guide 2011*, *Philippines Free Press*, *Philippine Graphic*, *Ani 33*, *Liwayway*, *Sirmata*, *Tinig*, and the *Literary Apprentice*.

Douglas Penick is a prolific author, having written for various media. He has written the National Film Board of Canada's prize-winning two-part series on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the libretti for two operas with Peter Lieberson, and a theater text accompanied music of Philip Glass. Penick has authored three books deriving from the epic cycle on the life of King Gesar of Ling and has contributed short fiction, essays, and poetry to a range of journals.

Daniel Emlyn-Jones is passionate about Singapore: its complexity, turbulent history, and inspiring journey from the dark days of World War II to the present. When not writing, Daniel works in the healthcare industry in the UK, but tries to visit Singapore at least once a year. He is even trying to learn Cantonese, the family language of his Singaporean friend!

[Mary Shanley](#) is a poet and writer. She is a native New Yorker with two books published: *Hobo Code Poems* and *Mott Street Stories and Las Vegas Stories*. She has contributed stories and articles to *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood*, *Blue Lake Review*, *StepAside Journal*, *Bittersweet Editions*, and *Logos Journal*, and has appeared on WBAI, listener-sponsored radio in New York City. She maintains a [blog](#) and a [MySpace](#) profile.

Byron Edgington is a writer and full-time student who capped a forty-year aviation career in 2005 to write, and to return to college. He has contributed articles and stories to the *Evening Street Review*, *Gemini Magazine*, and *The Chrysalis Reader*. His essays have won several awards, including the Swedenborg Foundation's Bailey Prize and Ohio State University's Lantern writing prize. Edgington lives and writes in Columbus, Ohio.

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April 2012 featured author interview with Shaz Johar

{Several of our contributors have been sharing good news of receiving writing contracts or having their fiction published in a range of literary venues. Starting with the 8th issue, we will be highlighting the continuing publishing successes of our contributors in a new page on this site. As an expanded sampler, here is a brief interview with issue 1 contributor Shaz Johar.}

Q. What is it that compels you to write? And what are some of your motivations?

I have been fond of writing ever since I was a teenager. I don't like numbers, history, or geography. I was more of a music-singing-artsy kinda student, so during my free time, I used to write novellas on a writing pad and share them with my classmates. I even expected them to review the stories or discuss them. When I saw that they liked them, I would write more stories. They were usually about teenagers and what was happening around me.

My for-fun novellas stopped when I got a job. My hectic life as a fulltime customer service consultant took up my free time and drained my creativity. When I took a job with a publishing company, I ended up doing research on books and authors from all over the globe. Slowly, my interest in writing returned.

Q. Describe your writing process. Do have any odd writing habits?

I like to write my stories in the middle of the night when everyone has already gone to sleep. I will finish nearly 1,000 words before I go to bed. The next day, I will continue my writing in the train using my Blackberry on the way to work or coming home, if I get a seat. I do the same routine almost every day.

Q. Since contributing two short stories to the inaugural issue of *Anak Sastra*, you have gone on to publish two novels with KL-based Fixi. What benefits did you find from writing the stories in Malay? And what has surprised you most since becoming a published novelist?

To be honest, my English grammar is bad. Like seriously bad. That's why I chose to write in Malay. And I think when I write in Malay, it is easier for me to connect the stories with the readers. There are some words and jokes and stories that I want to tell which can only be understood in Malay. When you translate them into English, you don't get the same point across.

Kougar is my first novel, and it won the Selangor Young Talent Awards 2011, a statewide award to recognize young artists and their creative works. Winning was really a surprise I didn't see coming. The urban Malay book concept is quite new to the public here so when I heard that *Kougar* and *Tabu* both went into their third printing, I was so happy. I would like to thank all of the readers and fans who have supported me from the beginning. I appreciate it.

Q. What themes do you cover in your novels, *Kougar* and *Tabu*, and why did you choose those topics?

Kougar tells a story about a forty-year-old woman who navigates life as an unmarried woman with a strong attraction to younger men. *Tabu* deals with society's prejudice against obese women and interracial dating.

I chose both topics because people in general are judgmental and shallow, especially when it comes to bigger-sized people and older, unmarried women. Since I grew up with four sisters and have tons of girlfriends who like to share their personal stories, I thought it would be a good idea to write a book for people to better understand their circumstances, or perhaps, become more comfortable with the idea that it is not wrong to be different. After all, beauty comes in all shapes, looks, and sizes.

Q. Tell us about your most memorable experience about having lived or traveled in Southeast Asia.

Hanging out at the mamak stall, having *teh tarik* and *roti canai* in the middle of the night. You won't get that elsewhere.

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"Maybe Next Sunday"

AFTER coffee, the old man of the house took a seat on his favorite chair--it was his habit--in the *sala* near the window where he could see the narrow front yard and the concrete road. It was Sunday. The previous Sunday, he had waited for his eldest son. His younger son, however, had come instead.

"Has Manong come?" his son asked after taking off his helmet and alighting from the motorcycle.

"Not yet," the old man replied. "But he sent me a text message saying he'd come this weekend. How's work?"

"Good," he said and took the old man's hand and brought the back of it to his forehead as a sign of respect.

"How are the kids?"

"They're good."

"It's been a month since your brother's last visit. I wonder why?" The old man looked at the road to see who would get off the *jeepney* which suddenly stopped. When he saw that it was the son of his next-door neighbor, he turned to ask his son, "Have you any news?"

"I heard he enrolled for his master's degree in one of the universities in Urdaneta. He's taking Saturday classes. I guess he wants to be promoted to a higher teaching position."

"That so?" the old man nodded. He knew, quite well, that the eldest was the more studious of his two sons. Both his sons were degree holders. His eldest son passed the licensure examination for secondary school teachers in 1997. On the other hand, his younger son graduated with a degree in elementary education but opted to work in a large feed manufacturing plant instead of taking the licensure examination and teach.

"I'll take a nap before I go home," his younger son said.

The old man nodded. He knew his son meant the town of Villasis. He watched his son untie his shoelaces. A father to three kids, his younger son took his advice. 'If I were to relive my life over, I would like to have four kids instead of two.' That was his regret. He finally realized this when both his sons got married and left to live on their own. Living alone made the old man long for a much bigger family than what he had had. It is hard, living on one's own without anyone to look after him whenever his blood pressure rose or when

something untowardly happened. It was the night that he feared the most. He recalled one evening when he felt thirsty and needed to have a glass of water. He almost fell from the bamboo stairs after suddenly feeling dizzy. Fortunately, he was able to hold on to the bamboo railing. He told his sons about the incident. He was fortunate to have good neighbors who came to see if he was alright whenever he stayed in the house longer than usual. His next door neighbors would often bring a bowl of *tinola* or *adobo* to his door. He would gladly accept, transfer the dish into one of his own bowls, return the bowl without washing it--believing that it was good luck to return the bowl unwashed--and say "thank you *sa uulitin*." To the old man, it was a blessing; this act of giving in his native tongue is called *padigo*--a way of showing camaraderie among neighbors.

From the road, the old man shifted his eyes to look at the framed photograph of his eldest son and his wife on top of the old television set. It was taken before the two got married. The couple wore their sweetest smile in the photograph as if they were smiling at him. He knew the two were a perfect match. Both were teachers. They met each other while teaching in a private school in Urdaneta. Now, the couple teaches in the same public elementary school in Laoac. The couple, going on their fifth year as husband and wife, had not been blessed with a child yet. He longed for a grandchild, an *apo*, from his eldest son. The old man once told his eldest son that he wanted to take care of his would-be *apo* before he dies. Time and again the old man would ask the couple: "When will you give me a grandchild?" He advised his daughter-in-law to go to a *hilot*, a masseur.

"Did I get to the nerves of those two?" the old man sighed and shook his head as he looked again at the photograph on the old television set. His eldest son would drop by after a few weeks or a month or a couple of months. He knew not when exactly, and he wished his eldest son would come on a regular basis like his other brother. Was it too much a favor to ask his eldest son to come every Sunday? Was he to oblige his sons to visit him regularly? *Obligation*. The old man knew how much weight that word carried.

Once more he cast his eyes over the concrete road. He spotted the *jueteng kubrador*. He needed to place his bet for the day. To the old man, *jueteng* was more than just a game of chance; it was an exercise to challenge his powers of logic. Unlike the other bettors who depended on their dreams or events, interpreting these, and assigning specific numbers as representations, he believed that there is a pattern behind the results of the illegal numbers game. He even kept a small notebook, listing the winning-number combinations and trying to find a pattern that would help him calculate the next draw. He had yet to win in *jueteng* though.

He got up from his seat, took his small notebook and pencil from the top of the old television set, and went out the door to call the *jueteng kubrador* to place his bet.

The old man had just had his lunch. He was back on his favorite chair in the *sala*. The silence incited him to reflect on the past. He had been a regular RCPI employee, delivering telegrams to unwary clients, rain or shine. His work took him to far-flung *barangays*. He missed his sons' closing and graduation ceremonies and birthdays. His absence was evident in the photographs taken during such occasions. His sons were accompanied either by their grandmother or by an aunt. He would imagine how it felt like to be with his sons on the

stage awarding the medal or the ribbon his sons got at the end of each school year in front of all those people. "I had to work," he reasoned out. "Otherwise my sons would not have finished school."

It was not easy sending both his sons to college at the same time. His neighbors often asked him how he was able to make ends meet. Others, they would say, despite coming from well-to-do families had difficulty sending their children to college. "You are lucky," one of his neighbors said. "You have obedient sons. I, on the other hand, have to force my children to finish school."

His thoughts were interrupted by the screeching tires of a *jeepney* that made a sudden stop. One of its passengers hurriedly got off. But it was not his eldest son. The *jeepney* roared as it drove off.

"They'd probably attend church before they come here," the old man said to himself. He was not the church-going kind.

The old man noticed that the lush bougainvillea near the gate had grown thick and needed to be trimmed. It was something the old man looked forward to. He would spend one whole day with the old pair of scissors, trimming the bougainvillea to his whim.

He remembered the time when his sons were still young boys. He was the one who cut his boys' hair. His boys never complained. The old man had learned to cut and trim hair from his own father. But it was not on a boy's hair on which he learned the craft. When the old man was younger, his father had taught him to cut and trim their horse's mane. He became good at it. Neighbors came to him to have their horses' mane cut and trimmed. Those were the days when the *carromata* ruled the streets. "Those were the days," the old man whispered to himself.

Another *jeepney* stopped in front of his house. 'Is it them?' the old man thought. But it was the son of the couple living across the street who got off the *jeepney*.

'Maybe they would spend the night here,' the old man thought. "But they rarely did that," the old man also countered.

The old man glanced at his wristwatch.

"Anyway," said the old man, "I might as well prepare my dinner. Maybe next Sunday they'll come."

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"By the River"

The reader, sleeping, wandered through a dense, light-dappled rainforest. At a bend in the path, he found himself suddenly on the banks of a sluggish stream. Across the stream in deeper shadows, he could see a twig hut with palm-leaf roof. An old woman, cross-eyed, with dark, dusty skin and dirty, matted hair sat on the ground in front of the hut. Her half demented smile, as she glanced up at him, revealed a mouthful of broken teeth. With a skeletal right hand, she lifted a copper water pot to her mouth and drank. The water dribbled from the corners of her mouth, down her neck and along her dried up breasts. She hummed contentedly to herself. Suddenly she looked directly the reader. She stared and leered as she ran her black tongue slowly across her cracked lips.

The reader was embarrassed. He felt like a peeping tom and was filled with indecision, even panic. He did not want to be involved in any way with this crazy person, but he was caught by a certain disgusted fascination. His only alternative was to run away, but that would be even more embarrassing.

As he stood there fixed, all at once he noticed an enormous tiger prowling fluidly through the shadows, moving slowly towards the woman from behind her hut. The reader had seen tigers before: locked in cages, chained at palace gates, and even far off in the wild. But nothing prepared him for the immense sinuous power of the beast or the splendid opulence of its black stripes and orange fur. He felt himself reflected in the rapacious intelligence of its golden eyes. He thought he could feel the heat of its blood-scented breath, pulsing past the gleaming fangs and hard black lips, burning on his face. Unconcerned as the tiger crept close behind her, the old woman continued to stare at him, running her left hand up and down the inside of her thigh in a revolting and unmistakable gesture of sexual invitation.

Before the reader could react or shout a warning, the tiger shot out from the underbrush and leapt into the air. In one bound, the beast flew over the old woman, over the flat earth where she sat, over the river, and dropped, hot mouth gaping over the spell-bound reader. He passed out and felt as if he was swallowed into the black steaming void of the creature's maw. He was tumbling in the dark, beyond fear, pain, death. The tiger had devoured him, the old woman, the hut, the jungle, everything.

He felt a stream of cool water trickle down his throat, and he woke. His head lay in the hag's lap. Seen up close, her dark skin glowed like polished leather. She smelled pleasantly of cinnamon. She smiled tenderly at him as she carefully poured water from the copper pot onto his lips. The tiger, calm and majestic, sat curled around the hag at her back. From time

to time, he idly licked her shoulder, leaving a slight trail of spit. Though everything was simple and clear, the reader was confused.

“There isn’t any mystery here,” said the hag in a soft, light youthful voice. “You experienced this.”

Then, he was seated before her, and she stretched out her palm as if offering him something. At the same time, it seemed she might be about to ask a question.

But just before the reader could think of what he might say or ask or answer, she swung the copper pot in a swift arc and struck him hard on the head. There was an engulfing metallic thunk, a sudden burst of pain, and the reader lost consciousness.

* * * * *

"Mahjong"

For Mr. Thomas Kuek

Adam mixed the tiles in warm soapy water, the sharp clip-clip of their shuffling muffled to a soft clop-clop as he scrunched them in satisfying fistfuls beneath the clouds of foam. They would use the golden set today. He had seen it in a dream.

He pulled the plug and flicked the cold tap on full. The suds swirled and gurgled into the whirlpool, the golden backs of the tiles glimmering like bullion in the clearing water. He would win and win big. He knew it.

He laid the tiles out to dry on a towel next to a pile of chopped bitter melon and a gaping pomfret on the kitchen table. It was the mahjong host's duty to cook an ample evening meal for the players. Games would sometimes run through the night, and hunger was anathema. Adam was well known for his cooking and showed off somewhat. "Why you never cook like that for me ah?" his wife always protested.

He went into the mahjong room, a well-lit area that had once been a living space. He arranged a side table with the tea things, and turned a photograph of his wife towards the wall. He then examined the square mahjong table in the centre of the room with the four chairs placed on each side and felt a surge of excited anticipation. He hoped that he would get the east tile. He always won when he was east.

He would play that Saturday with Ah Huay, Mr. Chung, and Auntie Lin. Ah Huay was a Hokkien speaking school bus driver who lived for the weekends when she could gamble. She had had a lucky streak recently, which filled Adam with a mixture of envy and grudging pleasure. He liked Ah Huay. She never gloated and was generous with her winnings. A few weeks ago she had taken him and some other mahjong friends out for an evening meal at a posh restaurant in town. His native Chinese tongue of Teochew was also very similar to Hokkien, so they could chat, and sometimes leave Cantonese or Mandarin speaking players in the dark.

The third player Mr. Chung he didn't like but tolerated for the sake of numbers. He was an old man who sneered toothlessly at his competitors when he was winning, and accused them of cheating when he was losing. He had greasy black hair and smelt of moth balls and stale cigarette smoke. The fourth player, Auntie Lin, a retired Mandarin teacher, was good natured but rather scatty, and in mahjong, scatty playing can disrupt everyone's game. Adam looked out of the grate-covered window of his flat at the communal gardens several floors below. A mother was ordering her young boy to leave the friends he was playing

with and come inside for something or other. The child stamped his foot. "Don't want lah!" came back his petulant little voice. Adam smiled.

He walked to the side table and picked up his wife's photograph, feeling a familiar mixture of guilt and yearning as he looked into her shrewd, beautiful eyes. He remembered a family dinner twelve years ago to which the beautiful friend of his cousin had been invited. Amidst the chatter and the eating, he had stolen glances at those eyes and, at each glance, became more certain that he had never seen a woman more beautiful. Eventually she met his glance and smiled in return. He knew then that she would be his.

His mobile blared out a Chinese folk song. He placed the photo face down on the table. He guessed it was Mr. Chung saying he would be late, again. The man seemed to delight in being tardy, and always came with an excuse which blamed someone else. Adam would gladly have told him to get lost, but Mr. Chung was a hardcore player, and unfortunately, true hardcore mahjong players were not that common.

"Hello?" he answered irritably.

"Adam."

The voice wrenched his insides.

"What you doing?" she asked.

Silence.

"Let me guess. You're not earning money, so you must be throwing it away on that stupid game, right?"

"It's not stupid wat. I keep telling you. The whole of Singapore plays mahjong lah!"

"I don't want to talk and talk. We talk enough already. Everyone plays, ya, but you never do anything else! I don't like! I'm your wife you know. You married me, not that stupid game. You want to marry mahjong khaki it's too late lah!"

Against this familiar tirade Adam backed against the wall and slid down to a crouching position.

"I come back if you stop," she continued, more calmly. "You lucky lah. Most women don't give so many chance lah."

"Cannot Debby," he pleaded. He could no more have given up mahjong than he could have stopped breathing.

Silence.

"Come back lah." He spoke into her indignant silence without even realising it, and tears choked him.

“Stop playing that stupid game...” Her voice was soft and pleading now, as if she were talking to an intelligent six year old who couldn’t add two and two, despite years of coaching.

Silence.

She gave an exasperated sigh and hung up.

With effort Adam stood up, dried his face, fetched the tiles from the kitchen and automatically arranged them in neat rows on the mahjong table ready for the game. He then sat at the table, and gazed through the window grate at the distant vapour trail of a long gone plane billowing and warping in the empty sky.

The front door bell rang. Aunty Lin had arrived.

* * * * *

"More Grace Than I Bargained For"

Delirious and bleary eyed on the twenty hour flight to Bangkok, I watched six movies while most of the Asian passengers slept with their shoes off. Every few hours, I ate almonds, drank apple juice, and got up to stretch my legs until final touchdown. After the flight, I crashed for three days in steamy Bangkok, where I slept, swam, and visited Wat Po, a cluster of temples and shrines, elaborately decorated with multicolored tiles and gold; an enormous reclining Buddha was housed in a shrine room all to himself.

I hopped on a quick flight to Siem Reap, Cambodia. My destination? Angkor Wat, the revered twelfth-century temple. I had spent two decades dreaming of visiting this sacred site, and I was finally able to walk with the ancients, bedazzled by the massive Buddha-like serene faces carved into multifaceted stone towers. Originally a Hindu temple, Angkor Wat was the center of Hindu cosmology. Their sacred stories are represented in bas relief that extends the length of the main temple. Angkor Wat is now spiritual home to Theravada Buddhists and a destination for thousands who come to reap the blessings of the venerable structures that represent life and worship intermingled just as the Angkor Wat temples are entwined with the ever advancing jungle.

Drenched in sweat, and one inch from the equator, I guzzled bottled water while exiting the temple grounds. I was immediately captured by a group of young children who were diligently working the tourist crowds. They rushed me with bracelets, postcards, silk, and more bottled water. I was trying to be polite but was exhausted from the heat. I tried to dodge the kids, but it didn't work. They stuck with me until I bought something. They called out prices, and then lowered the price with ever increasing demands that I purchase from them. "Where are you from?" they asked, as they stuck by my side. "America," I answer. "Obama! Obama! We love Obama!" their voices elevated to an enthusiastic level. When I bought bracelets and postcards and water, this only enhanced my visibility as a sales target, and all the children in the area came running over, encircling me, dangling wares before my eyes like a never-ceasing carousel of need and determination.

I saw the shanties and thatched huts along the border of the rice paddies. Humid air caressed water buffalos in the distance. I watched blank faces squatting and staring into eternity, yet when I waved to them, their weary, lifeless faces quickly broke into huge, generous smiles as they waved back. Those brief exchanges of human spirit revealed more grace than I bargained for from the Cambodian people, who still lived with active

landmines planted throughout their countryside--dangerous reminders of the slaughter of one and a half million citizens first attacked by U.S. bombs during Vietnam War and continued bloodshed through Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime. That was only thirty-five, forty years ago. The presence of a generation of survivors, some limbless, walked among the outdoor markets, food vendors, cappuccino joints, and restaurants in a vibrant and thriving Siem Reap.

When Gene visited eight years ago, there were two hotels; now there are two hundred! Good! Let the world come to Cambodia and spend money and spread good cheer. The locals will greet you with a gracious bow, their hands respectfully pressed together in recognition of the divine in human form. I always return the bow.

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"Vinh MỠ"

Late August 1970. I was a 21-year-old Army helicopter pilot in Vietnam. The war was going badly for me. I'd been under fire numerous times. I'd lost good friends. I was tired, hassled by military banality, fearful every day of the unknown, the random violence that erupted in an instant, making me wary, and weary far beyond my age. The tension and ambivalence I felt about the war had made me cold, cynical, an angry man. Prior to Vietnam I'd been a happy, carefree youth, hopeful for my future, confident that the world was a good place, that what I did mattered. The war had changed me, defeating my optimism, turning me into someone I hardly recognized: I joked about human suffering; I shared negative outcomes with fellow pilots; I developed a mordant sense of humor that even then I knew I'd need to change if I survived to go home to family and friends. The crux of it was that the war in Vietnam made me doubt the human capacity to love, the compassion I'd always assumed was present in everyone, and especially in me. I no longer recognized the man in the mirror, and I didn't like the fellow very much.

But one belief I still held onto: we never know what connections and benefits might accompany the routine things we do. Some call it the butterfly effect; some refer to ripples on a pond, their widening burbles spreading all directions, touching lives undreamt and unknown. Even in war these things happen, perhaps especially then. Indeed, in times of greatest stress and tension we most need to follow our instincts, paying attention to the inner voices that guide us, too, in all directions, like those benevolent ripples.

That steamy August day I'd been assigned to fly for a detachment called U.S. Army Vietnam. USARV was a liaison between the U.S. and South Vietnamese military. My day was filled with routine air transfers of equipment, mail, documents, beans, and bullets to several locations around northern I Corps, the northernmost area of the then Republic of South Vietnam, near the DMZ. The USARV mission was a good one, with nice people, easy flying, and a laid-back list of clients. I logged five flight hours in my Huey, refueling twice. By 1600 hours, four p.m., I'd finished my last sortie. During a previous leg, my company operations had radioed, advising me that the commanding general, the big boss, had ordered all 'his' aircraft on the ground by five p.m. A storm was brewing, and the general didn't want it to damage his aviation assets. I responded to my sergeant in operations. "Roger...on the ground by seventeen hundred. No problem."

Continuing with the USARV mission, I carried more materiel, ammo, hot chow, the usual stuff an army needs to do its job. The day slipped by with more of the same, an easy mission. But, as I'd often in my newfound pessimism joked with colleagues, an easy mission could turn nasty in a heartbeat. At four-fifteen, the USARV people released me, and I

headed back to home base at Camp Eagle. Looking forward to a shower, dinner, and a cold beer at the club, I aimed my Huey that direction, with plenty of time to gas up and tie things down by five o'clock.

Then the aircraft radio sputtered. It was the USARV fellow calling back. He had another mission, a medevac flight down the coast. A young Vietnamese woman was in labor, he explained. The baby was breech. "If she doesn't get to a hospital soon..."

I checked the time: four-twenty. I checked the gas gauge: it showed enough fuel for about forty minutes of flying. I did the math. A flight down the coast, flight back to the hospital in Hue, off-load time, back to base, then time to gas up... No way would I make the general's curfew. Fuel was iffy as well. Also, a look to the east sent a chill up my back: the storm was close, and getting closer. My finger hovered near the transmit button to send my regrets. I had to decline the mission. Besides, a nagging irritation swept me, a self-indulgent simmering about why those people hadn't called sooner? Didn't they know about the girl's condition all day? Am I responsible for their poor planning? Good Lord, she's been pregnant for nine months! It was the cynical me pressing forward, unattractive and unbidden. The USARV fellow called again.

In that moment I heard the urgency in his voice, felt the tension between my old compassionate self, and the new calculating me that I was still unsure how to live with. I wavered. I had orders to be on the ground soon, orders from the general himself. I'd done the damn mission all day, and I'd done it well. I was tired; my crew needed rest; fuel was low; the war was wrong. I didn't need the aggravation. Still, a young woman and her unborn child needed my help. I looked at my crew. They all nodded yes. I called the fellow back, telling him I'd fly the mission. Down the coast I went, old, altruistic me battling the new, hardened veteran who wanted to protect himself.

The little village was called Vinh Mỹ. It was a fifteen-minute flight from Hue. I battled a fierce headwind flying down, but that was a comfort. It meant a healthy tailwind flying back. I located the village, landed my Huey there, and watched as the frightened girl boarded the helicopter. I took off, wind gusting, dollops of rain like half dollars smacking the windscreen. It was ten till five, and the storm was nearly on top of me. The sky was the color of a day old bruise, and the wind was on its hind legs. Pulses of lightning, and the boom and crash of thunder chased me up the coast to Hue. As I'd suspected it might, in a heartbeat, my easy, simple day had become filled with danger and difficulty.

The first glitch of many came at the hospital in Hue where they wouldn't accept the girl. No room, the orderly said. With one eye on my pregnant patient, one on the gas gauge, I pleaded with him, but he wouldn't budge. Angry and chastened, the storm getting stronger by the minute, I took off, flew to the ARVN military hospital inside the old Citadel, where yet another gatekeeper turned me away, saying they didn't accept women, much less pregnant ones. Angry and desperate, fuel gauge dipping below reserve, I took off into the storm toward Phu Bai, and the American military hospital. To my great relief, the 85th Evac accepted the girl without question. A torrent of rain dousing my windscreen, I watched the orderly in soggy fatigues wheel her inside.

With the gas gauge on empty, and half an hour late for the general's deadline, I took off, headed back to base, and landed. I secured the aircraft, made my peace with the general, and went to the club. With my fellow pilots I cursed the war, nursed a beer, and waited out the storm. It blew out around midnight, and the next day was like any other. I forgot about the girl, and my trip down the coast to Vinh MỸ. At the time, the experience with the bureaucracy and banality of it all fueled my cynicism, that the war was stupid, an unnecessary use of my time, and a danger to life and limb. I felt good about rescuing the girl, but the feeling faded, and I went back to my sullen outlook. Later, back home in Ohio, I was to hear the rest of the tale.

After the war I was anxious to fly again, to add hours to my logbook. Flying was one of the few positive outcomes of my time in Vietnam, though there would be others, as I was to find out. In September 1971 I joined the Ohio National Guard aviation section.

At that time the Ohio Guard had a medical helicopter program called the Medicopter. It was good duty, with a dedicated staff, good equipment, and a mission I enjoyed, rescuing people by air from highway accidents and medical emergencies.

I was assigned Medicopter duty one Friday night in the spring of 1972. The Medicopter staff consisted of two pilots, two crew members, and two civilian medical personnel. The doctor was a fellow named Stuart Roberts, a member of the ER staff at The Ohio State University Medical Center in Columbus. That night, the Medicopter crew was in the ready room, eating pizza, telling war stories. As I waited on a call, I sat across from Doc Roberts who was chomping pizza, listening to one tall tale after another. "There I was," and "Listen to this" and "This is no crap..." Shared experiences of war passed from one veteran to the next.

When my turn came around, I began describing a rescue mission for a pregnant girl in Vietnam. The tale included a warning from my commanding general to be on the ground by five o'clock, a flight down the beach, slamming doors at hospitals, fuel exhaustion, high winds, the vicissitudes of war. On and on I went, my emotions over memories of that day making my voice quake. It was the conflict I'd felt between the old, compassionate me, and my cynical self seeping out, another brush with the guy I still saw in the mirror, after a year home from the war. I mentioned the storm, the edict from the general, fuel depletion, and how all those factors reflected the overall thrust of the war with its maddening, inhumane demand to choose one path over the other, good over evil, right over wrong. I'd debated the same things that day, whether to press on, or to ignore the feelings of compassion and leave the girl to her fate, humanity be damned. With levity, and a sense of bravado, I regaled my fellows, boasting about my dismissal of the general's order, my bravado in the face of danger. Telling the story, I tried to be the hardened warrior. But my voice and emotion betrayed me, and I began to sound like my old, caring self, the guy I once was proud of. Halfway through the tale, Doc Roberts sat forward. His brow furrowed, and he leaned in my direction to listen better. Roberts had been posted to Vietnam doing an internship. All I knew about his duty there was that he'd been in country about the same time I was, but I

didn't know where. Roberts listened to my story about the pregnant girl, and he smiled. He put his pizza down, and interrupted me. "Was that in August of '70?" he asked.

"Yeah, Doc. Why?"

"Girl from Vinh MỸ, down the coast a ways?"

"Yes..."

"Big storm that night?"

"Big storm," I said. "...in fact, I was late getting..."

"I delivered that kid," Roberts said.

Chills peppered my arms. "You delivered..?"

"I remember you landing on our pad with her. I thought you were nuts to be flying in that weather, but..."

"You delivered that baby?"

"Yep. Baby boy. Mom and kid did fine. We made junior a crib out of an empty rocket box, and they went home the next day."

Tears pooled in my eyes. I couldn't speak. The room was silent as a nave. I thought back to that August afternoon, the girl, the weather, the mission, and my own inner conflict that almost turned me around. Ripples spread in all directions. I'd accepted the mission, rescued the girl, and an intern named Stu Roberts took over from there, and saved two lives. Maybe three; I saw that angry pilot who'd made those choices, saw him battle his harsh, judgmental self, watched him make a decision that might have been his reason for being in Vietnam in the first place. At that moment I began to like the fellow again.

Excerpted from chapter 3 of a memoir of Edgington's time in Vietnam titled *The Sky Behind Me*.