

Thank You For Your Service

Karl Michel

The dark of the tent, hot like an oven,
Mirrors the darkness of my soul.
We have gathered for briefing,
To review our plan to find
And 'neutralize' the enemy.

When you're twenty-two,
You shouldn't be this old,
An old hand at killing and
Indiscriminate destruction,
Executed without feeling,
The mind having long ago
Shut that door.

The eyes still see the horror,
You hear the agony of others,
But there's only numbness
And the everyday emptiness
Of living without emotions.

Okay, we're going in,
Going fast, going low,
Going without a moral compass,
Going on someone's word who can't be trusted,

Some Judas willing to profit at the expense
Of other lives.

Welcome to the past,
To a time of living close to the earth,
To the smell of pigs and the play of seasons,
Of monsoon and dry times,
Of fallow fields and cultivation,
Houses made of dirt and straw,
All beyond the comprehension
Of our modern minds.

And typically, the enemy
Is gone or was never here.
Who knows?
But we've got to search
For whatever,
For something, anything
To make this all seem worthwhile.

Soldiers overturn baskets
And pots, dragging the
Villagers from their
Simple homes,
Tearing their world apart,
Spreading fear and confusion,

Stirring resentment

In their "hearts and minds."

Jackpot!

We've found medicine in vials

In the hut of some

Young mother

Who clutches a baby

At her breast.

And of course she has to go,

Go in for "questioning,"

As it's euphemistically put.

This is not a civil affair,

Not with her trussed and hanging,

Shoulders wrenched

Out of their sockets,

Questions punctuated by

Slaps, kicks, and punches,

Leading to "dialing long distance"

On a field telephone generating 90 volts,

Wired to her body and cranked.

The next day,

I hear how she died,

Muttering names,

Any name to stop the pain.
Her screams began when
I jerked her baby right out of her arms
And pushed her to the waiting helicopter.
She screamed until her life gave out.

In passing years,
In odd moments,
Unexpected and unbidden,
The sudden awareness
Of screaming comes,
Growing to crescendo
And then fading like an echo,
Waning in the emptiness
Of my hardened heart.

Karl Michel has been writing poetry since 2014. The Vietnam War is the subject of many of those poems. He shares experiences that persist in his memory, which feeds his poetry. Michel invites catharsis through his commitment of memories to something as concrete as words—his real motivation behind writing.