

Three Poems

Doug Anderson

Kill Him With a Name

We were taught to call the enemy gook,
slope, dink, and worse,

because it's easier to kill
that way, easier to sleep at night

if you've merely crushed a roach
under your boot heel,

sprayed poison down some hole,
or set a whole village on fire

to kill its vermin. But when we
dragged that guy out of the hole

and stood him up, and he blinked
in the glare, all five feet of him

covered in mud so that even his
black pajamas were gray with it

he didn't look like anything
you'd want to kill

in spite of his being a tough little shit,
taking round after mortar round,

rocket after rocket
and still firing back at us while his

squad slithered through the leaves
and got away.

He just stood there, maybe hoping
for a quick death, just a shot

to the back of the head,
no interrogator to slip a hat pin under his nail.

I knew then that I couldn't say *gook* again,
could not joke

about burning the poisoned land
where, for reasons

that grow dimmer every year
we were sent to fight a war.

Fishing On the Lunar New Year

They're dropping grenades off
the Danang River bridge
to keep the sappers away
but all they do is kill the fish.
So old Ba, betel-black teeth,
starts his splay-toed wobble
down to the river to wait
for his dinner to float by--
maybe a big catfish this time.
Who's here now? The French?
No, they're long gone.
It's those bright-eyed boys
from America. Can't keep track,
he thinks, and my poor wife's
not around to tell me.
Up river, his grandson, sixteen,
in the ARVN, stands on the bridge,
stares down into the water looking for
the sapper's bubbles,
grenade sweating in his hand.

Saturday Night in Hanoi

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The Red River deepens its channel, tumbles its hoard
of Chinese ivory, Legionnaire's helmets, Japanese bayonets,
shells of American Helicopters, jingles the dog-tags
of the fuck-happy innocents in their missing bone bags
and dumps them deep off the delta of history.
But tonight, in Hanoi, couples tango in the streets,
neon reddening their dignified faces. There were
thirty-eight million of them during the war, now ninety –
Eros sprung back full when the last Americans
lifted off the embassy roof. How many times will I come back?
As many as necessary, and even after death, to sit
among the three-strand beards of other old men
and be warmed when they show their tobacco-stained teeth
in the slow, opening smile. My heart opens its fist.
Who knew I'd find love here?
This is more home than home because long ago
it broke me, then gentled the pieces back into light.
Stateside, people don't talk about this war anymore,
carry it like a slow-growing tumor. But here,
the war is over. In old Hanoi I can drop my mask.
I finish my café sua and wander back out into the streets.
An old woman smiles at me for no reason at all
and a child gives me a three-toothed grin. *Xin Chao*.
There are lovers on motor bikes and the smells of a thousand meals.
I breathe it all in. I could die here and be free.
I peel a green orange and find gold.

Doug Anderson's book of poems, *The Moon Reflected Fire*, from Alice James Books, won the Kate Tufts Discovery Award, and *Blues for Unemployed Secret Police*, from Curbstone Books, a grant from the Academy of American Poets. His play, *Short Timers*, was produced at Theater for the New City in New York City in 1981. His memoir, *Keep Your Head Down, Vietnam, the Sixties and a Journey of Self-Discovery*, was published by W.W. Norton in 2009. His book of poems, *Horse Medicine*, from Barrow Street, was published in 2015. His new book, *Undress, She Said*, was published by Four Way Books in September of 2022. His work has appeared in the *Massachusetts Review*, *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, the *Southern Review*, *Field*, and other publications. He has written critical articles for the *New York Times Book Review*, the *London Times Literary Supplement*, and the *Boston Globe*. He has received fellowships and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, Poets & Writers, and other funding agencies. He has taught at Emerson and Smith Colleges, the University of Massachusetts, and the MFA programs at Pacific University of Oregon and Bennington College. He is an affiliate of the Joiner Center for the Study of War and its Social Consequences at UMASS Boston.